



BRIDE of the BEAST

Clan MacKenzie Series

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

SUE-ELLEN
WELF  NDER

Bride of the Beast

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Did you know?

Author's Note

Sneak Peek

Devil in a Kilt

About the Author

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Also by Sue-Ellen Welfonder

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Blurb

Bride of the Beast

A headstrong lady, a battle-torn knight, and a lesson in temptation!

Twice wed and twice widowed, Lady Catherine Keith has no need for a champion. She can fend off unwanted suitors on her own and guard her Scottish stronghold without the help of any man. But her sister, knowing better, sends a make-believe husband – a battle-scarred knight more than able to slay her dragons.

Sir Marmaduke Strongbow has a secret ambition. He wants not Catherine's castle and land, but her hand in marriage and her heart to own. With tantalizing caresses, he will show her how a real champion lays siege – and how love is impossible to fight.

Praise for Bride of the Beast

RT Book Reviews TOP PICK, 4 ½ Stars, and K.I.S.S Hero Award

“Powerful. Bride of the Beast will leave an indelible mark on readers’ hearts. Sir Marmaduke is a hero to dream about and you’ll be as much under his spell as Caterine.” ~ Romantic Times

“Wonderful .. well told ... delightful characters.” ~ Romantic Reviews

“Thrilling ... so sensual at times, it gives you goose bumps. Welfonder spins pure magic.” ~ Reader to Reader Reviews

“A keeper among keepers whose sheer beauty is sure to bring tears to your eyes and joy to your heart.” ~ Reviews That Grab Your Attention at Writers Unlimited

“Best we’ve read all year. Welfonder makes you feel as if you are actually there. A novel to cherish.” ~ The Historical Romance Club

“Everything I had hoped for and more. For a true love story, readers need look no further.” ~ Romance Reviews Today

“Extremely moving. Marmaduke has the magic to wrap himself around the hearts of millions. Welfonder once again produces another winner!” ~ Myshelf.com and Bridges Magazine

“Fantastic. This book is not to be missed.” ~ The Word On Romance

“Welfonder is adept at spinning a historical Scottish tale. Existing fans and new readers will be delighted. Charming and captivating!” ~ BookLoons Romance Reviews

“Character-driven and fast-paced, Bride of the Beast is a very enjoyable, romantic read. Don’t miss it!” ~ The Best Reviews

“Thrilling. Vibrant characters. Sensual. Ms. Welfonder spins pure magic!” ~ Reader To Reader Reviews

“With each book Welfonder reinforces her well-deserved reputation as one of the finest writers of Scottish romance.” ~ RT Book Reviews

“Welfonder takes the reader away from the mundane and gives her an emotional journey that floods the senses and makes the heart pound.” ~ Long and Short Reviews

“Welfonder weaves ancient histories, legends, and fascinating lore into sensual Highlander romance.” ~ Writers and Readers

“Welfonder’s love of Scotland shines on every page.” ~ Romantic Times

“Welfonder writes great tales of passion and adventure.” ~ Romance Reviews Magazine

“Welfonder knows all the best ingredients for the perfect Highland romance.” ~ A Romance Review

“Sue-Ellen Welfonder books are like good friends...you’ll laugh with them, cry with them, dream with them and keep them with you always!” ~ Amazon

Mini Excerpt

A Battle of Hearts...

“I would slay your dragons, my lady,” her champion vowed. “If you will let me.”

“If I...” She paused, freezing where she stood. Too captivated by his chivalry and the hard-muscled expanse of his chest to think, much less continue across the rush-strewn floor.

She did lift her chin. “You have done enough, good sir. I am grateful of your help in ridding us of the earl’s tyranny.”

“I did not mean him.” His words confirmed what she suspected. “I would battle the dragons gnawing at you from within. Let me banish them.”

“Some beasts are greater than any champion’s sword.”

His gaze warmed. “A sword is not a man’s only weapon, my lady.”

Dedication

In loving memory of my father-in-law, Gottfried Welfonder, a man who bore a scar of his own and, like Sir Marmaduke, carried it with dignity and grace, overcoming formidable odds to always stand tall. He was a true gallant. A fine gentleman of the old school, a hobby gardener, and lover of books who would have been so happy to know I write. He lives on in my heart.

Acknowledgment

I want to thank the readers who fell in love with Sir Marmaduke in Devil in a Kilt. Your many requests for this special character to get a happy ending of his own is the reason this story came to be. This book is yours, as is my deep appreciation.

As always to my very handsome husband, Manfred, my own dragon slayer, for putting up with all the nonsense of a writer's life, and for keeping the real beasties of this world far from my door. Also a heartfelt nod to my beloved, sadly-late Jack Russell terrier, Em. Little man, I miss you unbearably. As well, to Em's best buddy, my darling writer cat, Snuggles. He rules my world and makes sure I love every minute of serving him. *(cat lovers will understand)*

A Personal Note to Readers

Please note this is a work of fiction and not meant to reflect cold, hard reality. The following pages contain elements of fantasy such as Celtic myth and legend, Highland magic, enchanted stones, a ghost, etc. A suspension of belief is therefore required. As this is a romance novel, there is lovemaking. Such scenes are steamy and explicit. As a romance novel written by me, the story does not contain the F-word. It does include one of my most beloved heroes, proof that it's never too late for true love, sword fights, all the rowdiness, treachery, and glory of medieval Scotland. There's also a clifftop castle setting inspired by a place that holds sweet memories for me. Some place names have been changed, though most are actual locations. Above all, this is a story of chivalry, honor, and love. The real world won't be found in this book's pages, only a reflection of how I wish the world could be. I hope you'll enjoy spending time there.

Wishing you Highland magic,
Sue-Ellen Welfonder
(aka Allie Mackay)

Quote

*“A man who bridles his heart will never know happiness.” ~ Sir
Marmaduke Strongbow, champion knight, dragon-slayer extraordinaire,
believer in love*

Chapter 1

Dunlaidir Castle

The Eastern Coast of Scotland, 1330

“**W**hat you need, my lady, is a champion.”

Lady Catherine Keith stiffened her shoulders against her companion's well-meant counsel and continued to stare through the arch-topped windows of her tower bedchamber. Far below, the North Sea tossed and churned, its slate-gray swells capped with foamy white, its roiling surface a perfect reflection of her own inner turmoil.

A curtain of silence fell between the two women until the crackle of the hearth fire and the whistling of the autumn wind reached almost deafening proportions.

Rain-laden gusts lashed at Dunlaidir's thick stone walls, rattling the window shutters with such fervor Catherine wouldn't have been surprised to see them ripped away and hurled into the sea.

A sense of foreboding crept up her spine, its portent unsettling. A cloying premonition as cold and relentless as the dark waves battering the cliffs upon which Dunlaidir Castle so proudly perched.

Still, she said nothing.

She didn't want to consider her friend's suggestion. Indeed, she preferred to pretend she hadn't heard.

Undaunted by her silence, Lady Rhona gushed on. “I can see him before me. A mighty warrior who swings a great sword, a belted knight of chivalric fame,” she enthused, her young voice breathy with excitement.

Filled with flimsy fancies Catherine no longer believed in.

Perhaps had ne'er believed in.

Ne'er been allowed to believe in, much as her heart had once sought to cling to such foolish dreams.

“*My lady,*” Rhona implored. “Think of it! A battleworthy knight to vanquish your foes at a mere glance. A brave warrior willing to hew them to bits should you but ask. A great champion, respected and

feared-”

“I do not want a champion.” Catherine swung around to face her friend. “I desire nothing but to be left alone.”

“And I vow it is desire you need,” the ever-romantic Rhona blurted, then clapped a hand over her mouth as a pink tinge crept onto her cheeks.

Slipping behind Catherine, she yanked the shutters into place, closing out the rain and wind, but plunging the chamber into semi-darkness. “Of a mercy!” Rhona fretted, hurrying to light a brace of candles. “I meant no disrespect. ’Tis only you’ve never known-”

“I know fair well what you meant,” Catherine said before the younger woman could babble on and embarrass them both. Careful to keep her back straight, she sank onto the cushioned seat built into the window embrasure.

It mattered scarce little that the slanting rain had dampened the finely embroidered pillows. She had more serious matters to contend with than catching a chill.

“Your concern is appreciated, but not needed.” She glanced at Rhona. “I know much of men. Think you having outlived two husbands has left me an innocent?”

“Of a certainty, nae, my lady.” Rhona busied herself lighting the remaining two candles. “No one is more aware of your plight than I. Did I have aught but your best interest at heart, I would not urge you to send for a champion.”

Catherine raised a staying hand. “You speak of desire. I need a solution to my problems, to Dunlaidir’s problems, not a man to warm my bed.”

Leaning down, she scooped her golden-brown dog, Leo, onto her lap. “I will not seek another man’s attentions regardless for what purpose. Leo is the only male welcome in this chamber, as you are well aware.”

“Leo cannot protect you from a man as powerful as Sir Hugh. The man is a dastard craven capable of great and vile knavery. Your only hope is to ask your sister, Lady Linnet, to send help.”

“Think you one Highland warrior will deter a Sassunach earl with a garrison of mounted knights?” Catherine drew Leo closer, taking comfort in the soft warmth of his little body. “Even a mighty MacKenzie would be hard-pressed to stop de la Hogue from gaining hold of Dunlaidir Castle through marriage to me.”

“Then you must render such a union impossible by wedding your champion.”

Indignation flared in Catherine’s breast. “I do not *have* a champion. Nor will I impose on Linnet’s good graces by asking her to send one. And were I so inclined, which I am not, binding myself to such a man

is no more palatable than marriage to Sir Hugh."

"How do you know you if you haven't met the man your sister will send?"

"Oh, have done, please." Catherine gave her friend an annoyed look. "I will not suffer a third husband, champion or otherwise."

Rather than answer her, Rhona began pacing the room, tapping her chin with a forefinger as she went. Catherine braced herself for the prattle soon to erupt from the younger woman's pursed lips.

After years of companionship, she knew her friend well. Fingertapping always preceded outbursts of foolishness. Silly ramblings that made sense to none save Rhona herself.

"I have the answer!" Rhona cried then, clapping her hands together. A triumphant smile lit her pretty face. "Simply pretend to wed the man your sister sends."

Catherine's brows shot heavenward. "Pretend?"

"Aye." Her friend beamed at her, obviously waiting for Catherine to comprehend the brilliance of such a scheme.

Catherine disagreed.

Worse, her aggravation with Rhona's badgering was making her head ache.

"You are the one who does not understand." Pushing to her feet, she carried Leo across the rush-strewn floor and set him on his sheepskin bed near the hearth. "Have you not heard me? I will not plead Linnet's aid nor will I enter into marriage again. Not even a false one," she said, meeting Rhona's exuberance with what she hoped sounded like firm resistance.

Firm and unbending.

Above all, unbending.

"Your plan won't work," she said, pressing her fingers against the throbbing at her temples. "Don't mention it again. Please."

"But it's your best chance to be rid of Sir Hugh," Rhona wheedled. "Have you forgotten he vowed to obtain an order from his king, forcing you to acquiesce if you not agree to the marriage by Michaelmas?" Rhona lifted her hands, clearly frustrated. "My lady, the feast of Michaelmas is long past."

"For truth? Catherine plucked at an imaginary speck of lint on her sleeve. "Since our stores have grown too meager to allow us to celebrate St. Michael's holy day, I hadn't noticed its passing. Nor do I care what Edward III declares I should do. Yet is this land held for young David of Scotland."

"Lady, please," Rhona entreated. "You have no other choice."

"Say you?" Stung to fury, Catherine clenched her hands to tight fists. Beyond the shuttered windows, thunder sounded, and the low rumbles echoed the churning bitterness inside her.

"You err, Rhona." She turned to her friend, willed her to understand. "I do have choices. The trouble is, as so often in my life, none of them appeal.

"All my days, I have lived under a man's rule," she went on, ignoring the stinging heat behind her eyes. "Even now, newly widowed of an elderly but not unkind husband, and at a time when, at long last, I'd thought to find some semblance of peace."

Peace and solitude.

"Lady, I am sorry." Rhona's face fell, her eyes full of sympathy. "But it could be worse."

"Indeed?" Catherine knew better for, in that very moment, Sir Hugh de la Hogue's heavily-jowled face rose before her, his swinish eyes gleaming with satisfaction, the sound of his heavy breathing giving voice to his lecherous nature.

Catherine shuddered. The mere thought of the Sassunach's bejeweled fingers touching her made her skin crawl and sent bile rising thick in her throat.

"Lady, you've gone pale." Rhona's troubled voice shattered the loathsome image. "Shall I fetch the leech?"

"Nae, I am well."

"I do not believe you." Her dark eyes flooded with concern, Rhona rushed forward to grasp Catherine's hands. "Oh, my dearest, you must relent. The MacKenzie men are bold and valiant, gallants every one. Your sister's husband is a good man, he will send you the best warrior knight in his garrison."

Rhona released Catherine's hands and resumed her pacing. "Do you recall when he and your sister came for a visit some years ago? My faith, but the castle women were all aflutter did he but glance—"

"There is more to a man than the width of his shoulders and the charm of his smile," Catherine broke into her friend's praise of Duncan MacKenzie. "I will not deny my sister's husband is pleasing to the eye and possessed of a goodly character, however fierce he may seem at times. But I warn you, he is nowise a man by which to measure others. He is a rare find. My sister is blessed to have him."

"Aye, she is." Rhona clapped a hand to her breast, looking nigh to swooning. "On my oath, what a man," she gushed, her face aglow. "And it was more than his bonnie looks that impressed me. Ne'er will I forget how he unseated Dunlaidir's finest at the joust, yet had the good grace to allow your late husband to best him."

Rhona nodded slowly. "Aye, Laird MacKenzie is a just man. He will choose you a stout-armed warrior of great martial prowess, a man of honor to protect you."

A man of honor.

Catherine swallowed the argument dancing dangerously near the tip

of her tongue. She of all women had little reason to believe such a paragon existed. Though she'd seen many sides of the men who'd shared her life thus far, honor was one attribute most of them had lacked.

Only her late husband had possessed a portion thereof.

A meager dosage.

"Ah, Rhona..." She sighed, folded her arms. "You think this fabled and mighty Highlander, this man of honor, will lay aside his morals and agree to pose as my third husband?"

"You are seeing it the wrong way." Rhona ceased her pacing and again tapped a finger against her lips. After a moment, the finger stilled and she smiled. "'Tis for honor's sake he will agree. What man of compassion, of worth, could refuse a gentlewoman in need?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I do." Rhona's smile deepened. "I haven't a doubt."

"Is that so?"

"To be sure." The tapping started again. "Especially if you inform Lady Linnet of the near ruination facing Dunlaidir."

"Near ruination?" Catherine tamped down a bitter laugh. "We ran past that place ages ago."

"I know, my lady." Rhona pressed her hands together, her gaze desperate. "Once the severity of our situation is known," she started anew, "no man who abides by the code of chivalry would refuse you."

Saints cherish her, but Catherine didn't think so either.

Then so be it, she almost said, but a loud clap of thunder silenced her before she could form the words, stealing them as surely as if a swift hand had snatched them from her lips.

The thunder cracked again, a tremendous and resounding series of booms powerful enough to shake the floorboards and jar the window shutters.

The storm's black fury was a portent, she knew.

A sign the saints disapproved of the sacrilege Rhona would see her commit.

Or worse, an indication they agreed and frowned on her refusal to heed her friend's suggestion.

Something she would not, could not, do.

Catherine waited for the storm's rage to lessen, then smoothed the folds of her woolen gown. Before she lost her resolve, her nerve, she drew back her shoulders and forced herself to speak the words she must.

"Lady Rhona, I appreciate your concern and know you are ever looking out for my welfare," she said, her voice surprisingly calm. "But I forbid you to mention this matter again. I will not send for a champion."

Chapter 2

*Eilean Donan Castle,
Western Highlands, a fortnight later...*

Many leagues away, on the other side of Scotland, deep in the great, mist-cloaked hills of Kintail, a lone warrior knight fought an invisible foe. Naught but the repeated swish of his sword arcing through the chill air marred the quiet.

Even Loch Duich, hidden from view over the curtain wall, gave itself silent, its dark surface no doubt smooth as finely fired glass for not so much as a ripple, not the gentlest lapping of waves on the pebbled shore could be heard.

The hour was well before dawn, the time of day Sir Marmaduke Strongbow favored for practicing his martial skills. Soon, Eilean Creag Castle would come alive, the empty bailey would fill with a bustle of activity and his overlord's squires would trickle into the lists to join him, each one eager for him to prod and teach them.

Help them hone their own sword arms.

But for the moment, he stood alone.

Free to challenge his secret enemies, daring enough to face down the most formidable of them all: his own self and the self-created demons he carried within.

He paused and drew a deep breath, then swiped the back of his arm over his damp forehead. The plague take his cares. The saints knew he had much to be grateful for. Soon his own castle would be completed. Indeed, were he not a man who enjoyed his comforts, he'd move into Balkenzie now, this very day.

But he'd waited long years to raise his banner over a stronghold of his own, a few more months would not cost him overmuch. Then all would be ready and he'd take possession of his new home.

A castle he and his liege, Duncan MacKenzie, had designed with great care.

A strategically ideal fortalice to guard the southern reaches of

MacKenzie land.

A home perfect in every way save one.

Unlike his liege and closest friend, Marmaduke lacked a fair lady wife to grace his side. His castle would be filled with men.

Quelling the bitterness that often mocked him when alone, he adjusted his grip on the leather-wrapped hilt of his sword and lunged again at his unseen foes. Faster and faster, his blade rent the morn as he spun and dipped, thrust and withdrew, skillfully slicing his doubts and regrets to ribbons, banishing them one by one.

Until the morrow, when he'd challenge them anew.



"Sir..." the soft voice behind him was little more than a whisper to his ears but a great roar to his warrior's instincts. Lowering his sword at once, Marmaduke wheeled around to face the lady who'd addressed him.

"Fair lady, I am pleased as always to see you, but you should know better than to approach a man's back when he wields a sword," he said, sheathing his steel. "Nor do I believe it is good for you to be out in the chill morning air."

"I am fit enough," Lady Linnet countered, drawing her woolen cloak more securely about her before resting one hand upon her swollen middle. "I would speak with you alone, now before the others stir."

Sir Marmaduke peered intently at his liege lord's lady wife. Her lovely face appeared more pale than it should and lest the vision in his good eye was failing him, she bore faint purple shadows beneath her eyes.

Nor did he care for the rapid rise and fall of her chest. That she'd overtaxed herself in seeking him out was painfully obvious.

"Lady, you should be abed," he admonished, trying to sound firm but unable to be duly stern with her. "Does your husband know you are about?"

The two bright spots of pink that bloomed on her cheeks gave him his answer.

"I must speak with you," she said again and placed a cold hand on his forearm.

"Then let us go to the chapel." Closing his fingers over her hand, Marmaduke led her toward Eilean Creag's small stone chapel. "It is closer than the great hall, and more private." He gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "I would know you warm before I hear what troubles you."

He'd scarce ushered her inside when the chapel's door burst open

behind them. With a resounding crash, it slammed against the whitewashed wall.

"Saints, Maria, and Joseph!" Duncan MacKenzie fumed, ignoring the sanctity of the holy place. Ill-humor swirling round him like a dark cloak, he made straight for his wife. "Have you taken leave of your senses, woman? You should be abed. The entire household is searching for you."

Bracing fisted hands on his hips, he tossed a dark glance at Marmaduke. "Why am I not surprised to find her with you?"

"Becalm yourself, my friend," Sir Marmaduke urged, unfazed by the other man's bluster. "No harm has come to her."

Duncan harrumphed. "Were she your lady, I vow you would want to know her safe, too, Strongbow." Duncan ran a hand through his wind-mussed hair.

"I care for her as if she were my lady, as you know." Marmaduke placed his own hands on his hips. "Her well-being is of equal importance to me. There is naught I would not do for her."

"My lords, please." Linnet leaned back against the recumbent stone effigy of a former MacKenzie warrior, one hand still resting upon her belly. "I have told you nothing will go wrong this time. I know it. My gift has shown me."

Duncan peered hard at her, his handsome features as set-faced as his stone-carved ancestor. After casting another annoyed look in Marmaduke's direction, he swung about and strode across the chapel.

Dropping to one knee, he busied himself lighting a small brazier in the corner near the altar. "Have you told him?" he asked his wife when he stood.

"Told me what?" Marmaduke quirked a brow.

"My lady would ask a favor of you." Duncan slanted a glance at Linnet. "A great favor."

Sir Marmaduke didn't care for the way his friend spoke the last three words, nor the ghost of a half-smile suddenly twitching the corners of Duncan's mouth, but such reservations scarce mattered. He'd championed Lady Linnet since her arrival at Eilean Creag Castle five years ago, and she'd repaid his gallantry a thousandfold and then some.

In her presence, he could almost imagine himself rid of the scar that marred his once-handsome face and believe that, once more, his *looks* and not his well-practiced charm could turn female heads.

Indeed, he revered her greatly.

"Well?" Duncan drew out the word.

"No request Lady Linnet should ask of me is too great," Marmaduke vowed. Turning to her, he made her a slight bow. "How may I serve you, my lady?"

Rather than answer him, Linnet cast her gaze downward and began scuffing her toe against the stone flagging of the chapel floor.

Ignoring his friend's ill-concealed amusement, Marmaduke lifted her chin, encouraging her to look at him. "Name your desire and it is yours."

She met his gaze, but kept her silence. After a moment she moistened her lips and said, "Now that I stand before you, I fear it is too much to ask."

"How so?" Marmaduke shot a glance at Duncan then immediately wished he hadn't. His handsome friend now wore a bold smile.

A too bold smile.

Somewhere in Marmaduke's gut, a tiny shard of unease broke loose, a jagged-edged shard that jabbed his innards and grew more unpleasant by the moment.

The smile on Duncan MacKenzie's face grew as well and the gleam in the Highlander's eyes bode ill for Marmaduke,

He turned back to Linnet. "Lady, I cannot help you if you will not tell me what it is you wish me to do."

"I cannot," she said, shaking her head.

"And you?" He glanced at Duncan, alarmed to see that his friend's smile had now turned to a silly grin. "Will you divulge this great secret?"

"With pleasure," Duncan said, the mirth in his voice undeniable. "My lady wife's sister is in need of a champion."

Marmaduke lifted a brow. "I see nothing amusing about a lady in need."

"Then you will go to her aid?" Linnet asked, the tremor of hope in her voice going straight to Marmaduke's heart.

Iron control hid the mounting tension swirling in his chest, the dull thudding of a heart filled with other plans than riding off to slay some unknown gentlewoman's dragons.

"Think you I am the man to champion her?" his valor asked before his heart could stay his tongue.

"We know of no one better suited," Duncan answered for his wife. "Lady Catherine is newly widowed and plagued by a persistent Sassunach earl who would press her to marry him. Her holding, Dunlaidir Castle in the east, is sorely failing. Without help, she will lose both the peace she craves and the home she holds dear."

Duncan laid his arm around Linnet's shoulders and drew her close. "Nor is it in our best interest in these troubled times to see as strategic a stronghold as Dunlaidir fall into English hands."

Marmaduke rubbed the back of his neck. "Why not send a party of able men to assist her? Many are the warriors you could choose from."

"Name one whose sword arm is mightier than yours." Duncan's

fingers kneaded the woolen folds of his wife's cloak. "Who better than you, a Sassunach of noble blood, to challenge an English earl? You, with your martial skills and smooth tongue, are more suited to the task than a score of fighting Gaels."

Unconvinced, Marmaduke shook his head. "A full retinue would serve her better than a single man."

"Dunlaidir has a stout garrison. They only need direction. A firm hand and clear-headed man to lead them. Nor can I spare more than a few men with Balkenzie nearing completion. Nae, Strongbow, the task falls to you." His smile gone, Duncan aimed a penetrating stare at Marmaduke. "Or would you deny my lady's sister of your skill?"

"You know I cannot. It is only—" Marmaduke broke off, near stumbling over his usually quick tongue. He ran a finger under the neckline of his tunic. The chapel's somewhat stale, incense-laden air closed in on him with such pressure he almost gagged. "I'd planned to take occupancy of Balkenzie soon."

A poor excuse, to be sure, but he'd so hoped to hoist his own banner before Samhain.

"I'd planned to see the castle well-garrisoned and secure, secure for you, before the onset of winter," Marmaduke said, his words casting down the gauntlet of his hesitation.

"And so you shall." Duncan's flashing smile reappeared. "Upon your return."

Marmaduke opened his mouth to argue, but Duncan silenced him with a raised hand. "You shall be settled within your own keep's walls by Yuletide at latest," his liege declared. "Then we shall all gather at Balkenzie's hearth and drink to my lady's health."

"And to our bairn's," Linnet added, the conviction in her voice and the look in her eyes doing more to dismantle Marmaduke's resistance than all her husband's bold words combined.

As if he sensed his friend's crumbling will, Duncan clamped a firm hand on Marmaduke's shoulder. "It will not take long for a strong-armed warrior such as yourself to have done with one odious Englishman?"

Taking his hand off Marmaduke's shoulder, Duncan gave him a friendly jab in the ribs. "A fat and ill-fit one, if we choose to believe the tongue-waggers."

Marmaduke swallowed hard.

Something was amiss.

And whatever it was, it slithered up his back, cool and smooth as a snake, to then curl around his neck and squeeze ever tighter the longer he watched the merry twinkle dancing in his friend's eyes.

Marmaduke frowned. "There is something you are not telling me."

"Oh, dear." Linnet glanced away.

“Ah, well...” Duncan stretched his arms over his head, loudly cracking his knuckles. His fool grin widened. “As ever, I can hide naught from you,” he said, almost jovial. “I’ve long suspected you’re as blessed with the sight as my fair lady wife.”

Lounging against the cold stone form of his long-dead forebear, Duncan finally tossed down his own gauntlet. “Lady Catherine wishes you to pose as her husband. Only if word spreads she has wed a third time, does she believe she can rid herself of her current woes.”

Marmaduke stared at his friends, too stunned to speak. None would deny he loved them well. Saints, he would give his life for either of them. But what they proposed went beyond madness.

Impossible, he should *pose* as any lady’s husband no matter how great her plight.

No matter who her sister.

Never had he heard anything more preposterous.

“You ask too much,” he found his voice at last. “I will offer the lady full use of my sword arm, and I shall guard her with my life so long as she requires my aid, but I will not enter into a blasphemous relationship with any woman.”

He bit back a harsher refusal on seeing the hope fade from Linnet’s eyes. “By the Rood, Duncan,” he swore as softly as he could. “You should know I am not a man who would pretend to speak holy vows.”

“Then don’t,” Duncan said, triumph riding heavy on his words. “Make the lady your bride in truth.”



Make the lady your bride in truth.

His friend’s parting comment lingered long after Duncan and his lady took their leave. Like the repetitive chants of a monk’s litany, the taunt echoed, increasing in intensity until the words seemed to fill not just his mind but the close confines of the chapel as well.

Make the lady your bride...

By the saints, did his liege mean to mock him? Duncan MacKenzie knew better than most of the loneliness that plagued Marmaduke in the darkest hours of the night, was well aware of Marmaduke’s most secret desire: to have a fine and goodly consort of his own once more.

And a sister of Lady Linnet could be naught but a pure and kindly gentlewoman.

Was there more behind his friends’ insistence that only he can champion the ill-plighted young widow?

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Marmaduke’s mouth and a pleasant warmth the likes of which he hadn’t felt in many years began to curl round his heart.

Make her your bride...

The words came as a song now.

A joyous one.

Hope beginning to burgeon deep within his soul, Sir Marmaduke went to the altar, sank to his knees, and bowed his head.

Sometime later, he knew not how long, a shaft of multi-colored light fell through the chapel's one stained glass window to cast a rosy-gold glow upon his folded hands. The beam of light illuminated his signet ring, turning it to molten gold and making the large ruby gleam as if set afire.

Then, no sooner had the colored light reappeared, did it vanish, extinguished as if a cloud had passed before the rising sun.

But Marmaduke had seen it rest upon his ring.

A portent from above.

Once more, he murmured a prayer. One of thanksgiving and hope. When at last he rose, his decision was made.

As soon as he could muster what few men Duncan could spare him, he would journey across Scotland to aid a damsel in need. A lady he would offer not just his warring skills and protection, but marriage.

A true one.

If by God's good graces, she would have him.

Chapter 3

Cold rain pounded the outer stair to Dunlaidir Castle's towering

keep, drenching not only the steep stone steps but also the coarse woolen cloth of Lady Catherine's mantle. Preferring a soaking to moving aside and bidding entry to the Sassunach earl standing before her, she met his arrogance with the haughtiest look she could muster.

"You will forgive my lack of hospitality, Sir Hugh," she said, letting the iciness of her voice convey her true sentiments. "The hour for our evening meal is soon upon us and I fear our humble pottage of dried peas and broth is not worthy of your exalted palate."

"Lady, a dry crust of bread would taste as savory as roasted venison if consumed in your fair presence." Sir Hugh de la Hogue gave her a thin smile. "Would you cease your pointless attempts to resist me, I shall see you dine on naught but the finest of victuals for the rest of your days."

"You needn't trouble yourself." Catherine stepped backward until she met the barrier of the keep's half-opened door. "What I sup upon is my concern and no one else's. With our cattle all but vanished these past months, I've grown quite fond of watery soups and seaweed pasties."

"A pity your tenants have stooped so low as to steal from their own lady's herd." The earl made a great pretense of studying the rings adorning his small fingers. "Would you honor Edward's writ and welcome me as your new lord husband, I should deal swiftly with the thieving peasants."

"There are some who doubt our own people have aught to do with our dwindling resources." She leveled a narrow-eyed stare at de la Hogue. "A good night to you, sir. You will excuse—"

Sir Hugh's arm shot out, his fingers curling in a tight grip around her elbow. "Very dear lady, I urge you not to wax too proud," he said, his features growing stony, the glint in his eyes, menacing.

"Heed my words well." He cast a meaningful glance at the walled courtyard below. His henchmen arrogantly sat their restive steeds, the horses' iron-shod shoes making hollow clacking noises on the rain-slick cobbles.

To a man, his mail-clad knights' appeared every bit as hostile as their lord, their hands hovering threateningly near the hilts of their swords in a silent but not to be mistaken show of might.

A warning only one as desperate as Lady Catherine would dare ignore.

Even so, she lifted her chin, let her eyes fire more anger at him.

"I did not ask you to come here this day," she said, her tone icy. "Not on any day, that I recall."

"Lady, if you cannot be amenable, well..." His steely grip on her arm became a slow and far too intimate caress. "Be aware it would cost you dear to vex me. Already I grow weary of standing in the rain. Do not provoke me further."

Catherine lifted her chin a notch higher. "Then do not delay your departure. I wish you Godspeed on the journey to the rainless refuge of your own hall."

She met his glare with equal arrogance, not even allowing herself the much-needed relief of blinking away the raindrops dripping onto her lashes and into her eyes.

More annoying still, her futile efforts to free herself from the earl's grasp seemed to amuse him.

And – the saints help her – what other interests.

Releasing her, he stepped back and let his gaze rake the length of her. His breath quickened, its foulness coming at her in fast little bursts while his generous paunch rose and fell with ever-increasing rapidity.

As if he could see beneath the scant protection of her well-worn garb, he gawked openly at her breasts and other secret places, clearly enjoying the way her rain-wet garments plastered themselves to what curves remained on her too-thin body.

"I bid you good night, sir," she said, her skin crawling as his gaze fastened on the vee of her thighs. Nigh slack-mouthed, he brought his hand to the hilt of his sword. But unlike his dour-faced knights whose hands simply hovered near their weapons, Sir Hug left his fingers toy with the leather-wrapped grip as if fondling a woman.

Or himself.

Catherine shuddered. Either image was too repulsive to ponder. Too reminiscent of other English hands doing other vile things, black memories best left buried beneath the weight of years.

A great heaving began in the depths of her stomach, roiling waves of aversion, flaming hot one instant and bitter cold the next, but she remained standing tall. Unyielding and hopefully not showing the dread he and his minions ignited within her.

"So you would see my back?" His fingers slowed even more, his stroking of his sword-hilt, obscene. "Nothing else?"

“Be gone.” Catherine willed herself not to tremble. “I have seen all of you that I can bear.”

“You would be wise to remember that I hold power of pit and gallows,” he warned, his gaze snapping back to her face. “My authority extends over your dominions as well, Lady Catherine.”

“What are you saying?”

“Ah, well...” His fingers now plucking at the globular pommel topping the hilt of his sword, he slid a glance at his men. “Word has come to me that some women in your family carry the mark of a witch. I am not of a mind to examine and see for myself if you bear such a blemish. Yet.” He paused, cupped his hand over the sword pommel. “Should you displease me further-”

“Say you?” Her restraint snapping, Catherine stepped forward, thrusting her face within inches of Sir Hugh’s. “Would that I possessed such powers,” she seethed. “I’d turn you into a toad!”

“I was not aware you had such heated blood.” The earl smiled, a hungry look in his eyes. “Perhaps I shall enjoy sating myself on you, after all. I am a man of great appetite.”

“Then you will starve, for you will not dine on me,” Catherine vowed, hoping he mistook the quaver in her voice for scorn rather than dread.

“My lady will never grace your bed, sirrah!” Rhona pushed through the door opening to glare at the earl. “She is spoken for. A great Highland warrior will arrive any day to make her his bride. Her sister’s husband is sending him.”



“RHONA!” Catherine whirled on her friend, her blood running cold. “Be still-”

“Why? I speak the God’s own truth.” Rhona put back her shoulders, then turned to Sir Hugh. “My lady’s sister is married to the MacKenzie of Kintail, the Black Stag, a much-feared warrior chieftain. He has negotiated a most agreeable marriage for Lady Catherine. She will wed the most accomplished knight in his garrison. A champion.”

All amusement vanished from the earl’s face. “Is this so?” He stared at Catherine, his expression a strange mix of anger and incredulity. “Would you dare defy Edward of England’s wishes? He has vowed to see you wed to an Englishman – to me. He desires Dunlaidir safe, in English hands. ’Tis his behest.”

“Your king’s wishes do not matter to me, his orders even less. I hold no allegiance to an English sovereign.” Catherine’s distaste for the English churned inside her. “Nor will I wed a Sassunach,” she said, her pulse racing faster with each spoken word. “Not you. Not any man of

that tainted blood. I would sooner rot away of the pox before I'd allow Dunlaidir to fall into English hands."

"So you mean to marry some wild and heathen Highlander?" Sir Hugh challenged her, his gaze hard. "Edward will be much displeased. I am displeased."

Caterine pressed her lips together. The blackguard could take what answer he might from her silence. She'd get her own answers, from Rhona, as soon as the odious earl and his grim-faced henchmen removed themselves from her holding.

Sir Hugh's heavy-lidded eyes narrowed to slits. "I do not believe you." His stare bored into her, stripping away the last bits of pride she'd wrapped around herself. "You are lying."

"I do not think you'd accept another husband, Englishman or Gael." His knowing gaze pierced the darkest hiding places of her soul. All vestiges of his earlier attempts at chivalry gone, he derided her, "You are too dried up and pepper-tongued to give yourself to any man no matter his blood. Nay, I do not believe it."

"Be gone and may the plague take you!" Rhona dashed forward, near shoving the earl down the stairs. "Go now lest I fetch a blade and run you through myself!"

"Rho-" Caterine tried to call back her loyal companion, but her voice failed her, dying in a sputtering croak, her throat suddenly as dry as Sir Hugh had accused her man-weary body of being.

As if he'd known exactly where to aim his hurtful words.

More shamed by his slurs than she cared to admit, she stood stiffly at the top of the stairs and watched her friend hasten Sir Hugh down the steps. At the bottom, he shook off Rhona's flailing arms and glared up at Caterine.

"Know this, I shall watch for the arrival of this Gaelic warlord," he vowed, his voice reeking of venom and spite. "If he arrives, I will be present at your nuptials for only then will I believe it."

Dashing the rain from his forehead, he glowered at her. "Should he not appear within a fortnight, I shall claim this holding, and you, for myself. Fourteen days, lady, and then my patience will come to an end."

Cold anger rolling off him, he stalked across the rain-shrouded courtyard to where his men awaited him, their solemn faces still set in hard, disapproving lines.



CATERINE STOOD as if carved of stone, her hands clasped tightly before her, as Sir Hugh and his knights rode out of the courtyard and across the narrow bridge of land spanning the deep chasm between

Dunlaidir's promontory and the cliffs of the mainland, a formidable headland now all but invisible behind teeming sheets of rain and mist.

When the last clattering noises of their departure faded and nothing more could be seen of them, she exhaled, finally letting her shoulders sag.

Only then did she push the wet strands of hair off her forehead and dash the cold raindrops from her face. At last, she accepted her ill ease, the nerves sending chills all through her. Her entire body trembled, quivering like brown and dried leaves on an autumn-bare tree.

"Lady, come inside," Rhona soothed, once more at her side. She placed an arm around Catherine's shoulders and urged her toward the shelter of the waiting hall. "In fresh and dry clothes and with a belly filled with hot soup, you'll feel better. You must not listen to Sir Hugh's insults. He is furious because you've thwarted him."

"Aye," Catherine said, her voice flat. "And now you seek to undermine me. Or dare I hope your babble about Linnet sending a champion was just that – babble?"

"I never babble." Rhona flashed her a smile as they stepped into the dimly lit great hall. "I may meddle now and then, but only for your own good," she added, pausing to secure the iron-studded door.

"And what meddling have you done?" Catherine probed, her blood thrumming with a new kind of agitation. "If you've ignored my wishes and sent for a champion, you've not only thwarted Sir Hugh, you've thwarted your own ill-considered plans as well."

"How so?" Rhona blinked. "I may have overstepped my bounds by sending a courier to your sister, but once Duncan MacKenzie's man arrives, you will see the wisdom of having a brave master-at-arms to guard you."

"By pretending to marry me?" Catherine could hardly push the words past the bile in her throat.

"I but wished to help, my lady." Rhona gave her a look so guileless Catherine almost felt guilty for arguing with her.

Almost.

She glanced to the side, released a long breath before turning back to her friend. "Did you consider that with Sir Hugh in attendance it will be exceedingly difficult to hold a mock ceremony?"

"You wouldn't invite him."

"Of course, I wouldn't," Catherine agreed, wishing it was that simple. "He would come all the same, if only to watch from a distance."

"You think he would dare?"

"I do."

"But he now knows Linnet's man is a great champion," Rhona

argued, a hint of awe in her voice. "A warrior knight of untold skill and fame."

"Ah, well." Catherine rubbed her arms, annoyed that even with a fire going, the hall was so cold. "If Sir Hugh is worried about such a paragon, which I doubt, he will send a spy in his stead. God knows he has them."

"He will know the marriage is false before Linnet's champion and I leave the chapel. And then..." She glanced to where some of the larger castle dogs were sprawled on the floor rushes. "He will make his move, wreaking vengeance on us all."

"Oh." Rhona's dark eyes rounded. When she glanced at the blackened ceiling rafters and began tapping a finger against her chin, Catherine left her, crossing the near-empty hall as swiftly as her rain-soaked clothes would allow.

She did not care to hear whatever new pearls of wisdom her companion cared to offer. Truth tell, she already had a strong suspicion of what they'd be.

Rhona would smile, get that misty-eyed look on her face, and declare a true marriage to Linnet's chosen champion might prove to be the best solution to Catherine's woes.

Aye, such would be the words to tumble from her fanciful friend's too-loose lips.

Worse, Rhona would chatter on until she persuaded, or needled, Catherine into believing her. Trouble was, Catherine did not want to believe her.

Not this night.

Nor on the morrow.

And most especially not as long as a tiny and annoyingly persistent ember of hope nestled deep inside the hidden-most reaches of her lonely heart.

Chapter 4

Something was wrong.

Ill ease crept up and down Sir Marmaduke's spine as he reined in and surveyed the imposing curtain walls of the clifftop stronghold that marked the end of a long and harrowing journey.

Dunlaidir Castle sprawled high atop a massive bluff jutting far into the North Sea, and attached to the mainland by a high and narrow ridge of land. Sheer cliffs fell straight to the sea on all sides, making the stronghold near impenetrable – if only someone manned the empty gatehouse guarding the castle's sole means of access.

But nothing more daunting than wheeling seabirds, a few hardy weeds, and a stiff sea wind, occupied Dunlaidir's most important defense.

No men-at-arms strode forward to question the approach of Sir Marmaduke and his four companions.

The gatehouse stood neglected, leaving the way into the stronghold's more vulnerable inner heart wide open.

Twisting in his saddle to face the four Scottish knights behind him, Marmaduke peered sharply at each man. Their faces reflected his own wariness, and their posture as they sat their steeds bespoke keen awareness.

"Duncan spoke highly of Dunlaidir's garrison," Sir Lachlan, the youngest of the Highland warriors, commented. "It would seem they are no more."

"Indeed." Marmaduke nodded at the recently-dubbed knight, then cast another quick glance at the apparently deserted gatehouse. In the distance, Dunlaidir's crenellated curtain walls rose proud against an iron-gray sky, yet not one guardsman could be seen patrolling the impressive ramparts.

"All appears abandoned, yet I vow unseen eyes have observed our every move since we crossed onto Keith land earlier this morning." Marmaduke drew his great sword and rested the sharply honed blade almost casually across his thighs. "I do not believe those eyes belonged to the village folk who scuttled away, disappearing into their hovels, the moment they caught sight of us."

As one, his companions nodded in agreement. Sir Alec, the oldest and most battle-proved of the Highland knights, spat on the rocky ground, then swiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "An ill wind blows here," he said, unsheathing his own blade. "I dinnae like it."

The grim set of the other men's jaws assured Marmaduke they shared Alec's sentiments.

And his own.

A dark wind lashed against the clifftop stronghold, a formidable force of destruction threatening to plunge Dunlaidir's massive walls stone by stone into the cold waters of the sea. Leastways, if nothing was done to stave the air of decline so rife all around them.

Even the holding's vast surrounds had seemed contaminated by an oppressive cloud of dereliction: the once far-reaching arable fields lay untilled and fallow, what few livestock they'd spotted had been small in number and ill-fed, the tumbledown peasants' dwellings forlorn and cold-looking – as empty as the cluster of better-made stone cottages forming the village and now, the gatehouse and castle as well.

The handful of souls they'd come upon had skulked out of sight, their haggard faces averted as if they feared they'd be cast to stone did they but glance at Marmaduke and his small party of MacKenzies.

Saints, the taint swirled so thick Marmaduke could taste its foulness on his tongue.

Then the sharp yipping of a dog broke the silence. The sound came from afar, carried on the wind, but proved a welcome reprieve in a gray and chill world that presented itself more inhospitable than he had dared imagine.

Indeed, he'd expected to be welcomed.

Pushing that hope from his mind, he glanced at his men. "It would seem at least one inhabitant of Dunlaidir has stirred himself to greet us," he said, prodding his horse toward the gatehouse and the narrow spit of land looming beyond.

The dog barked again, the sound lifting his spirits.

"Come, my friends, let us make the little fellow's acquaintance and, if the saints are with us, that of Lady Linnet's fair sister," he called over his shoulder as his companions fell in behind him. "May God have mercy on the perpetrators if aught has befallen her."

Within moments, he'd reached the first gatehouse and rode beneath the raised portcullis, its steel-ended spikes benign and useless hoisted as they were and without a watchful guard to drop them in place should an enemy dare attempt to breach this first crucial defense.

But the only eyes to witness their passing were those of roosting gulls and a few fleet-footed rodents.

As if aware of their approach, the dog's barking issued anew,

closer this time, and Marmaduke kneed his horse, impatient to close the remaining distance to Dunlaidir's impressive but unmanned curtain walls.

There, too, at the main gatehouse, a second portcullis proved locked into a fully pointless position near the arched ceiling of yet another tunnel, this one carved into the very rock upon which the stronghold was built.

And here, too, no one barred the way.

Nor did vile-reeking refuse or boiling oil come sailing down from above to impede their passage.

Nothing stopped them at all until they clattered into Dunlaidir's inner bailey and Marmaduke came face to face with the lady whose heart he meant to win.

The woman he hoped would banish his long years of loneliness and put an end to countless nights spent sleeping in a cold and empty bed.

She stood not far from the outer stairs, a tiny golden-brown dog clutched in her arms, a look Marmaduke could only call serene resignation clouding what would surely be an angel's face if only she would smile.

His men rode up to flank him, reining in their steeds in well-researched formation, two to his right, two to his left. Marmaduke took scant notice of them, so intent was he on the vision before him.

The indrawn breaths of his companions left no doubt that they, too, were rendered speechless by the lady's stunning beauty and grace.

In truth, two lovely damsels stood awaiting them, one tall and fair, the other pleasingly rounded and dark, but Marmaduke knew instinctively which one was his.

The fair one.

He knew it deep in his gut, and not simply because of the faint resemblance she bore to his sister.

No, it was the look of vulnerability in the depths of her dark blue eyes that skewered his heart and gave away her identity. The invisible burden of long-borne unhappiness, and an unseen but palpable air of resignation weighing on shoulders she held so proud and straight.

His liege and his wife had spoken true. Here *was* a gentlewoman in a dire need of a champion, and perhaps in more ways than they'd been aware.

So with a driving urgency Marmaduke hadn't felt in more years than he cared to count, he wanted to champion her, burned to chase the shadows from her face and replace them with the glow of happiness ... of *love*.

His heart thumping against his mailed hauberk with the

exuberance of a green and untried youth, he swung down from his saddle and strode purposely toward her. At his approach, she set the small dog upon the cobbles. The wee nugget immediately bared his teeth and growled at him, but scampered behind Lady Catherine's skirts as he drew near.

No matter.

Marmaduke quickened his steps. He'd gain the wee beastie's approval later. For now, the lady would receive his fullest attention. And he, God willing, would begin to feel a lessening of the ache he carried deep in his soul.

Or so he hoped.



CATHERINE STOOD AS CALMLY as she could and waited as the tall knight strode toward her. Blessedly, she recognized the MacKenzie colors flung proudly over his mailed shoulder, and so steeled herself against his formidable appearance. Formidable, yet impressive. Every inch a true knight, his hauberk highly polished and shining like the sun, even on such a dark and dismal day.

He'd clearly stopped along the way, taking care to come before her without muddled gear, not wanting to greet her rumpled and stained from the long journey behind him, across the whole of Scotland, truth be told.

And so with all the grace she could muster, she offered him her hand when he dropped to one knee before her.

Her old nurse, Elspeth, the woman who'd raised her and her many siblings, had e'er impressed them never to judge a man – or woman – by appearance alone.

Certainly not by a scar.

What mattered was the goodness of one's soul, one's inner worth. The wicked slash marring this champion's otherwise arresting face was surely the remnant of some noble deed or a battle worth fighting.

Even though she'd rather he hadn't come at all, she knew Linnet would not send her a man she could not trust. Someone she could not rely on – even if his countenance might prove a bit difficult to gaze upon.

More than scarred, he appeared blind in one eye as well, but the expression in his good eye, a fine brown one, seemed a look of honest compassion and warmth. And, much to her surprise, the touch of his calloused hand as he lifted hers to his lips for a kiss, proved not entirely unpleasant.

Ne'er had a man treated her in such a courtly manner. For truth, he held her hand with so much care, she suspected he feared she

might shatter beneath his fingers.

“Fair lady,” he began, his English-accented voice instantly banishing the faint fluttery feeling his gallantry had stirred inside her. “Allow me to introduce myself,” he addressed her in fluid Gaelic, perfect save the coloration of the Sassunach speech of his mother tongue.

“I am Sir Marmaduke Strongbow, soon of Balkenzie Castle in the west, come from your sister, the lady Linnet, to champion you.”

“You are English.” The words came out sharp and cold, more harsh than she’d intended.

At once, the knight released her hand and stood. He inclined his head. “Yes, my lady, I am of English blood, but my heart beats only for Scotland. You have no cause to fear me.”

“I do not fear the English.” Catherine gathered his skirts for a swift retreat. “I revile them,” she said, then whipped around and sailed toward the stairs, her little dog, Leo, fast on her heels.

She hastened up the steps, desperate to put the massive oaken door and the hall’s thick walling between herself and the Sassunach knight her sister had had the ill-sense to send to her.

Unfortunately, it was not as easy to run from the disturbing flare of raw and needy emotions his gallantry had breathed to life deep inside her.

Chapter 5

Hours later, Catherine sat in stiff-lipped silence at Dunlaidir's high table and tried hard to ignore her keen awareness of Linnet's champion. Even without looking directly at him, just knowing him beneath her roof sent a strange warmth tingling through her.

She didn't care for the sensation.

Not at all.

Unfortunately, it persisted, making her immensely uncomfortable.

Pretending indifference, she smoothed her fingers along the edge of the heavily scarred table. Torchlight fell across her late husband's elaborately carved great chair, calling conspicuous attention to the chair's emptiness.

And the gravity of her plight.

"Are you troubled by his scar?" Rhona's softly spoken words cut through the quiet.

"Of course, not." Catherine snatched her hand from the deep knife scorings she'd been tracing with her fingers. A silly occupation chosen solely to keep from sneaking covert glances at the Sassunach.

"Why should his scar bother me?" She met her friend's probing gaze. "Think you I am so shallow?"

"Nae. It is just..." Rhona paused, ran a slow finger around the rim of her wine chalice. "The frozen-faced expression you've worn since he entered the hall gives me cause to wonder."

"Truly?" Annoyance, hot and tight coiled in Catherine's breast. "You should know what it is about him that aggrieves me."

"There is more to a man than the width of his shoulders and the charm of his smile. Your own words, my lady," Rhona reminded her. "Perhaps there is also more to a man than his blood? He did come to champion you."

"He is English."

"He was sent by your sister."

Something snapped inside Catherine. "Then he holds Linnet in such thrall she's forgotten why I would never welcome an Englishman into my home."

"Lady..." Rhona's expression softened. "I doubt she's forgotten,

though I wish you would.” Reaching across the table, she pressed Catherine’s hand. “This man is no craven. I cannot see him hurraing over the land raping innocents and dirking men before their wives’ eyes. Truth to tell, he seems quite the gallant.”

“An *English* gallant.”

“You cannot blame him for the villainy of others. What was done to you years ago and by-”

“English soldiers, and more of them than I could count,” Catherine finished for her, straightening her back against a deep-seated shame still as laming as the long-ago day she’d been so violated.

Half-turning in her chair, she pretended to study the nearby hearth fire. Anything but peer across the table and see pity in Rhona’s eyes. Instead, she risked a glance at the broad-shouldered English knight. He sat at a table on the far side of the hall, quietly conversing with his men, holding their rapt attention with the same mastery his sheer presence dominated the vastness of Dunlaidir’s great hall.

Annoyance welled in her breast. Even seated, his bearing marked him as a confident man.

A leader of men.

A charmer of women.

Indeed, if not for the scar running from his left temple to the corner of his mouth, and his damaged eye, he would have been quite handsome. Marred or not, he made a striking figure and possessed an air of calm assurance she would have found most appealing were not a Sassunach.

He looked her way then, almost imperceptibly inclining his head as if he knew she’d been perusing him. Knew, too, the conclusion she’d reached.

Her cheeks flaming, she swung back to face Rhona. All traces of commiseration gone from her pretty face, the younger woman gave her a slow smile.

A *knowing smile*.

Catherine cleared her throat. “I did not mean to imply he is ungallant,” she said, her voice catching on the admission.

It was the best she could do.

Rhona cast a slant-eyed glance at a glum-faced man slouched in the shadows near the hearth. “He is more courteous than some Scots nobles I shall not name,” she vowed, low-voiced. “My faith, even you must admit that.”

“Sir John has good reason to brood with de la Hogue and his minions housing in his keep,” Catherine defended her late husband’s friend. “We can be grateful we weren’t visited by so ill a fate and it wasn’t Dunlaidir Sir Hugh took possession of when he came north. God’s curse on the dastard.”

“And I say a pox on any who frown into the soup you offer them,” Rhona hissed, her unflagging loyalty coaxing an inward smile from Catherine’s heart.

Outwardly, she kept her expression impassive. “Sir John has suffered much. He lost everything.”

“Were it not for your hospitality, he would be sleeping in the heather.” Rhona warmed to a favorite topic. “He should be glad of a bed and dry roof, and not raise his brows at the food you set before him.”

Tossing a glance at the English knight, she pressed her point. “*He* is quality. Did you see how tactfully he declined Eoghann’s best attempts to seat him with us? You know he only refused because you made it obvious his presence anywhere near the dais end of the hall would displease you.”

“I will not argue with you, Rhona.” Catherine drew a long breath. She had noticed the knight’s chivalry toward Dunlaidir’s doughty seneschal, just as she’d noted the smooth gallantry he’d displayed when kissing her hand – and the way her heart had leapt at his touch. But the sour taste of her own bitterness weighted her tongue and kept her from making any such admissions.

Instead, she tore off a chunk of coarse dark bread – *peasants’ bread* - but found herself tearing it to bits rather than eating it as she’d intended.

“I hear much worth is placed on manners in the halls of English nobility,” she allowed, feeling petty but unable to stay her tongue. “’Tis only when they are away, across borders and far from home, that they show their true selves.”

Rhona smiled, took a deep sip of wine. “There you have it. He cannot get much farther away from England than Duncan MacKenzie’s Kintail lands. Even here, he’s a good distance from the border. And so his manners are genuine.”

Catherine frowned and popped a good-sized chunk of bread into her mouth rather than comment.

How foolish to have painted herself into such a corner.

Seizing opportunity, Rhona pounced. “Nor did he or his men rumple their noses at the salt herring and cabbage soup Eoghann set before them,” she continued her gushing praise. “They surely received finer fare at Eilean Creag. I vow your sister’s alms baskets are better filled than-”

“Have done, please.” Catherine reached across the table and lifted Rhona’s hand away from her wine. “And stop running your finger around the rim of your chalice. It’s annoying.”

“Oh?” As if to rile her even more, Rhona snatched the chalice, and, twisting around, lifted her glass at the English knight and his men.

When they raised theirs in return, she flashed Catherine a triumphant smile.

"Aye, most gallant," she declared, plunking down the chalice.

"He is English." The objection sounded peevish even to Catherine's own ears. "A Sassunach."

"A man." Rhona leaned forward. "One who went down on bended knee to offer his services to you. A Sassunach, aye, but with four stout-armed Highlanders standing beside him. They do not seem to mind his English blood."

Smiling benignly, Rhona trailed a finger along a particularly deep scar in the tabletop. "You should enjoy such a brave man's attentions."

"I do not want any man's attentions."

"Most ladies would swoon to have a champion knight pledge to her."

So I did, Catherine's heart admitted.

His mere touch had warmed her in places she'd thought forever cold, until she'd heard his voice.

"Stop praising him. He is not a paragon."

"No?" Rhona lifted a brow, sipped more wine. "I vow he's quite famed in Kintail. Perhaps as much a Highland legend as Duncan MacKenzie himself. You should be honored."

"He is here because my sister and her husband sent him. Likewise the knights with him." Catherine stiffened, bracing herself against the disturbing sensation she was teetering on the edge of a bottomless chasm and about to lose her balance. "Not all at Dunlaidir are as enamored of our visitors as you and Eoghann," she said, tossing a glance at the empty laird's chair.

The seat of honor usually occupied by her grown stepson, James Keith.

"Or have you seen James since their arrival?" Catherine glanced at the darkened stair tower, then turned again to her friend. "He's abovestairs, in his bed. He said his leg pains him, but I suspect the real reason for his absence is because he, too, isn't pleased my sister sent a Sassunach to help us restore Dunlaidir's fortunes."

"Pah!" Rhona reached for a bannock, began buttering it. "Would he exercise his leg more, he'd have no need to resent the arrival of men more able to defend his home."

"You are too hard on him. It is not his fault that he is lame."

"He is not lame, he was kicked by a horse."

"The result is the same," Catherine returned, spreading honey on an oatcake.

Rhona blew out an impatient breath. "Naught would ail him at all if he'd stop pitying himself."

Pausing, she cast a meaningful glance at the scar-faced champion.

“There is one who manages quite well, and with a more daunting impairment than an achy leg.”

Caterine, too, peered across the hall, irritation making her bold. She stared hard, her open gaze searching every inch of the man’s strapping build, looking for faults and finding none. Worse, she couldn’t deny the ease with which he spoke with Eoghann, one of the household’s most loyal retainers.

Even more telling, the slump-shouldered seneschal stood straighter the longer he listened to whatever the Sassunach knight was saying to him. Bobbing his head in apparent agreement, Eoghann talked profusely and gestured about the dimly lit hall.

Like her sister and Rhona, the castle steward had clearly fallen under the Sassunach’s spell.

A condition she would not suffer.

Rhona yanked on her sleeve. “Have you noticed the bulge of his arm muscles and the size of his shoulders? You could do worse, my lady,” she purred. “Many are the maids who would crave his favor.”

“Who would not admire his fine form?” Annoyance flickered in Caterine’s chest. “Or do you believe me as withered as Sir Hugh claims? Beyond taking note of a man so tall, so broad-shouldered?”

Rhona gave her a wounded look. “Ne’er would I call you-”

“I am neither wilted nor blind.” Caterine held her friend’s gaze. “Linnet’s champion is a compelling man. If not dashing handsomeness, and despite his English blood, he has an air of strength and assurance that is appealing.”

“But?”

“But nothing.” Caterine made light of Rhona’s probing. “Acknowledging such qualities or his powerful, well-muscled form is no different from admiring the fine lines of the great warhorses his accursed countrymen ride about on.”

Except no English destrier had ever set her heart a-flutter with one gallant hand kiss.

Rhona reached across the table and poked her arm. “In the shadows of the hall, it’s almost possible to imagine what he must’ve looked like before he was scarred.”

“In mercy’s name!” Caterine almost jumped up, ready to flee. “It scarce matters to me what he looked like then, or...” she trailed off to stare at the Sassunach’s table.

He and his men now stood, and his companions had donned fur-lined cloaks. Two of them followed Eoghann toward the hall’s vaulted entrance, disappearing with the castle steward into the cold night while the other two made for the turnpike stair.

Upward spiraling steps that led to the wall-walk.

They meant to patrol Dunlaidir’s ramparts.

Caterine's breath caught at the unexpected lurching of her heart. An unaccustomed sense of being protected, *cared for*, cloaked her with all the warmth and comfort of a much-used and well-loved blanket.

Such a wash of security, of ease, was an unfamiliar emotion, but powerful enough to wage fierce battle against her irritation.

Too many were the months she'd gone to bed wary, half afraid to sleep lest she awaken to find de la Hogue's henchmen looming over her.

Or worse, the earl himself.

A kick to her shin shattered the troubling image. "He – is – coming," Rhona mouthed the warning, barely finishing before the tall English knight stood before them.

"Ladies," he said in the fluid tongue of the Highlands, his voice deep and smooth.

"Good sir..." Her own tongue too clumsy to form more than the simple response, Caterine slid a glance toward the hearth, hoping support from Sir John, the only person at hand who loathed the English as soundly as she, but the sore-battered lord had slipped from the hall. The deep shadows where he'd stood loomed black and empty.

Wishing she could vanish as well, Caterine peered up at her sister's ill-chosen champion. "I hope you've dined well enough," she managed, her voice declaring her wariness despite the polite words. "We were not prepared for guests."

He didn't blink. "So it would seem."

"So it is."

"I understand, my lady."

You cannot possibly, Caterine's heart answered.

Their gazes locked, and a strange giddiness rippled through her. A curious breathlessness she'd never before experienced. Light from a nearby torch cast a sheen on his dark hair and glanced off the steel rings of his mail shirt, gilding them in such a way that his rock-hewn arm and shoulder muscles appeared all the more pronounced.

Faith, but he unsettled her.

"...ill suits you..." he was saying, but his looming presence flustered her so thoroughly she caught but a snippet of what he'd said.

She blinked. "If what ill suits me?"

"If he speaks with you," Rhona supplied.

Not heeding her friend, he gave Caterine a half-smile, and in the flattering play of light and shadow, that one brief smile clearly revealed that Sir Marmaduke Strongbow, late of England and soon of Balkenzie Castle in the west, had once been a very handsome man.

A very handsome man indeed.

"I said I regret if speaking with me ill suits you, but, nevertheless, we should do so," he said, his tone brisk, less warm. "Now, before I

join my men on the battlements.”

He studied her, and the intensity of his perusal gave her the disturbing impression he peered into her very soul, saw all her deepest secrets.

Her dreams.

And laid them bare one by one.

Something - anger? frustration? - flashed across his face, but vanished before she could decide.

He stepped closer then, causing a strange shift in the air around them. “Lady, I assure you my intent in coming here was not to aggrieve you.”

Heat surged up the back of Catherine’s neck. “I know why you are here.”

“But you did not expect a Sassunach.”

You did not expect a man whose face would give you worse nightmares than those already plaguing you.

The unspoken words seemed to flare in the brief space between them, so clearly Catherine was sure he’d spoken them aloud.

Yet she knew he hadn’t.

Not that it’d been necessary – the sentiment stood all over him, as clear as if he’d shouted.

“I did not expect any man,” she admitted, standing. “Aye, we must speak, but not here. I will accompany you to the battlements.”

Chapter 6

Marmaduke didn't flinch when Lady Catherine ignored his proffered arm. "After you, my lady." He made her a stiff bow instead, carefully hiding how deeply her slight had stung him.

Calling on every shred of his iron will, he followed her through the hall's gloom, pausing only to retrieve his fur-lined cloak before climbing the winding steps, always an arm's length behind her. When they reached the top landing, he swirled his mantle about her shoulders.

"It will be cold out there," he said simply, his fingers brushing the smooth warmth of her nape, the silken weight of her braided hair cool against the back of his hands.

To his relief, neither of the two men he'd sent to patrol the ramparts watched this segment of the wall-walk. Nothing but the chill dark and countless twinkling stars greeted them.

The night sky, a frigid wind, and the steady thumping of his heart.

Going straight to the crenellated wall, he rested his hands on one of the square-toothed merlons and gazed out at the sea. A crescent moon rode low on the horizon, its pale glow casting a thin ribbon of silver across the night-darkened water.

Glad for the peace, he gripped the cold stonework and let the wind's stinging bite ease the tight knot of heat Lady Catherine's rejection had put at the base of his neck.

Steeling himself, he turned to face her. "Your sister sends you warm greetings and bade me to assure you she is well," he began, purposely omitting any mention of Linnet MacKenzie's tender state, as had been the lady's express wish. "She would like—"

"I doubt, sir, that you wished to speak to me about Linnet," Lady Catherine said, the agitation in her voice at contrast to the haunted look in her eyes.

A goddess of ice. Beautiful, proud, and barriers all around her.

As if to prove it, she stood as straight as she could in his heavy mantle, drew a deep breath. "What I must tell *you* has nothing to do with her either."

"Then speak your heart, my lady."

“My heart, sir, has even less to do with it.”

Marmaduke leaned back against the merlon and folded his arms. “I am listening.”

“See you, there has been an error.” She looked at him, escaping tendrils of her hair dancing on the night wind. “My sister was duped. I did not send for you. My companion did. Lady Rhona. My dearest friend and worst enemy.”

“Your worst enemy?” Marmaduke lifted a brow, noted the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes, the shadows beneath them. “I think not, my lady. She surely meant you no harm.”

“She stirs mischief without thinking of the consequences.”

Giving in to an irresistible urge to be near her, Marmaduke pushed away from the merlon and went to stand before her. “Are the consequences so unpalatable? I have been here but a few hours and can already see you are in grave need.”

For the longest moment she said nothing, her gaze again fixed on the sea. When she turned back to him, her brow creased. “You must understand,” she began, her voice steady. “I did not want a champion. Nor am I desirous of a man.”

“And now your friend has thrust you into a situation where you must suffer both.”

She nodded, a flash of anger sparking in her beautiful eyes. But she said nothing. She just stared at him, her chin lifted in clear objection to everything he was and had hoped to do for her.

With her.

Hoping the dark hid the muscle jerking in his jaw, Marmaduke fought the overpowering urge to pull her into his arms, lower his mouth to hers and banish her cares with a kiss.

A fierce and claiming one – the kind he hadn’t given any woman in more years than he cared to admit.

“Lady Catherine, I know I am not a man to turn heads and steal hearts,” he said at last, the words coming from the devils that rode his back and not his own true self.

A self still handsome and unmarred.

“But scarred or nay, English or not, error or otherwise, your sister asked me to champion you and I shall,” his true self said. “I gave Lady Linnet my word. Denying her would be as impossible as not drawing breath.”

“Aye, impossible,” she agreed, surprising him. “My sister can be most persuasive.”

“There is little I would not do for her, that is true,” Marmaduke admitted. “And now I am here.”

“So you are.” She peered at him, the words she hoped he’d say almost blazing across her forehead.

Her face revealed all, letting him know that she'd expected him to declare it was dreadful of her friend to meddle, that he regretted coming in error, and would undo the younger woman's wild scheme by riding away on the morrow.

A shame he couldn't oblige her.

Instead, rather than announce his swift departure, he watched her with a steady gaze as she digested his vow to champion her whether she wanted him to or not. And that, thanks to her friend's interference, she had little choice but to accept his help.

Aid he was honor-bound to give her.

Never would he abandon a lady – peasant or princess – in such dire need.

And it couldn't be denied that his leaving would only hurl her into more troubling waters.

They both knew that.

There was only one other matter to address, much as he wished it wasn't necessary.

Sadly, it was, so he glanced briefly at the heavens, so bright with stars. Then he tamped down the last bits of hope that had stirred in him since arriving at Dunlaidir.

That done, he turned back to her. "Lady, I wished to speak privately with you because I must inform you there is one request your sister made of me which I cannot fulfill," he said, trying not to see how the lingering Englishry of his voice tightened her lips, chilling her whole demeanor.

She drew herself even straighter, lifted a brow. "What request of Linnet's might that be?"

"My shoulders are good and wide, Lady Catherine. Well able to bear any burdens troubling you," he said, more disturbed by her chilly reception than was good for him. "Any and all burdens save one. I will not pose as your husband."

Something indefinable flashed across her face, and before it could blossom into something he'd rather not see, he clasped his hands behind his back and began pacing the narrow breadth of the wall-walk, his gaze on the far horizon.

Anywhere but on her face.

Anything but risk seeing her flinch when he proposed a true marriage.

"Four, well-blooded warriors came with me," he said, hoping only he heard the slight thickness in his voice. "We bring you full use of our sword arms and our steadfast protection."

He stopped before her then, clenching his hands against the unsettling notion he was about to make himself look a fool. "And I, Lady Catherine," he rushed on before his nerve fled, "I would offer

myself to you. Not as a pretend husband, but a true one.”

She gasped. A tiny, breathy sound, barely audible above the wind. Not that she needed words. Her rigid stance, her wide-eyed stare and slipped jaw, all screamed her displeasure louder than any winter gale that could race in from the sea.

“No.” The terse rejection ripped a deep chasm between the man he’d once been and his dreams of ever being that old self again.

“And why not?” the sons of Beelzebub made him ask.

To his astonishment, a tiny smile curved her lips. “Not for the reason you suspect, I assure you.” She lifted her hand to his face, tracing his scar with a touch light as air.

Marmaduke stiffened. No woman had ever touched his scars. Not the slashing one that marred his once-handsome face, nor the countless welts criss-crossing his back.

No woman until now and the gentleness of that one fair touch near melted his heart.

She withdrew her hand, a look of confusion on her face as if she, too, had felt something. But the look passed so quickly it may never have been there at all.

“Your scar does not bother me,” she said, her bluntness taking him off guard. “I find your looks arresting,” she added, surprising him even more.

“It is just...” She paused, pushed her windswept hair back from her face. “My situation has changed since Rhona took it upon herself to plead my sister’s aid. It is indeed a true husband I now require, not simply a man willing to play the role,” she said, her pronouncement sending hope thundering through him.

“But I cannot accept you as that man.” The plain-spoken words dashed his newly-revived spirits as thoroughly as if she’d plunged him over the curtain wall and into the sea.

“Still, I want to make clear that my feelings have nothing to do with your face.” She smoothed a fingertip along his scar once more, the gentle touch torturing him this time. “Nor is it anything you have said or done, not you personally. ’Tis your English blood alone. That, sir, is a taint I cannot overcome. My sister should have known better.”

For the first time in Marmaduke’s life, words failed him. Her frank avowal crashed through him, mocking him and taking sides with his demons.

And, bold as they were, they stole his ability to do aught but stare at her.

“Lest I lose my courage,” she plunged ahead, clearly unaware of his anguish, “I would beg one favor of you.”

“Name your desire and it shall be done.” The chivalrous words came of their own volition, spoken as if from a stranger, though the

voice was undeniably his.

"Thank you." She peered at him, an earnest look in her deep blue eyes. "As my sister surely told you, Sir Hugh de la Hogue, who has been plaguing me for months, has vowed he will soon take me, and this holding, by force."

"de la Hogue?" Marmaduke's gut clenched at the mention of the abased churl's name.

"You know him?" The question etched worry lines onto her face.

"I have met him, yes," Marmaduke admitted, the pulsing knot at his throat sending coils of heat into his shoulders and up his neck. "In the early years of my knighthood – at the English court. A more debauched dastard never walked this earth, may the devil roast his hide."

"He is the reason I must ask your help. Not so much for myself, but to protect James, my stepson," she said, mentioning the young man Marmaduke had heard of but not yet seen.

The heir to Dunlaidir.

Marmaduke's blood iced. "What does de la Hogue want of the lad? Has he harassed him?"

"Not yet, but that means nothing." Lady Catherine twisted her hands. "Should Sir Hugh make good his threats, he would have done with James before the nuptial vows passed my lips. With James dead, his two-thirds of Dunlaidir revert to me. Better said, to Sir Hugh if I am forced to wed him."

And the black-hearted whoreson would have your life as quickly. Marmaduke kept his suspicions to himself, but from the look on Lady Catherine's face, she knew this danger without him giving voice to it.

"You needn't fear the earl, my lady." Marmaduke held her gaze, his own cares, his disappointments, forgotten. "He will regret the day he drew his first breath if he dare so much as look at you. On that, I give you my solemn oath."

Averting her gaze, she stared into the darkness, the strong sea wind pressing his cloak against her legs. "Thank you again," she said, her pride doing visible battle with her need of him. "You are a good and valiant man."

Marmaduke nodded. "I came here to help you," he said, struggling with his own battered pride. "But if it is a husband you seek and you will not wed me, then what is it you would have me do?"

"Your men," she said, looking back at him. "I beseech you to persuade one of them to marry me. A marriage in name only, to protect Dunlaidir and my stepson."

Marmaduke frowned at the rekindled hope rising in his breast upon hearing her wish.

"Fair lady, I must disappoint you." He hated the way her face fell,

loathed himself for seeing his own good fortune in the crushing of hers.

She looked down. "They are already wed," she said, correctly guessing the reason for his denial.

"All save Lachlan, the youngest. And even he is spoken for. The lad left behind a much-loved maid who eagerly awaits his return."

She closed her eyes for a moment. "Then there remains only you."

"That is true."

"Then so be it," she said, the moon's pale light falling full on her face and leaving no doubt about her distaste for the notion. "A marriage in name only."

"Lady, I have said-"

"Not now, please." She shook her head, raised a hand to silence him.

Marmaduke frowned, but said no more.

Easing his cloak from her shoulders, she handed it to him, and then slipped through the half-opened door to the stair tower before he could stop her.

Or warn her he meant to win her heart.

Agitated himself, he took a step forward, but she was already gone, swallowed up by the darkness of the stairwell, leaving him alone.

His only companions, the cold night and the heavy weight of his mantle, still warm from her body heat, indelibly branded with her scent.

For a long while, he remained where he stood and looked out at the sea, the cloak clutched in his arms. The moon was higher now and, may God forgive him for taking advantage of her plight, so were his spirits.

Lifting a calloused hand to his face, he retraced the path of her fingers. He'd almost swear his scar yet tingled from her touch, the gentle glide of her fingertips.

He knew his heart was still affected.

A marriage in name only.

Marmaduke blew out a long breath. He wanted more, so much more. He wanted to love again – and to be loved, desired, and even lusted after.

But a marriage in any form was better than none at all.

It was a start, a beginning.

More than he'd dared hope for a scant hour before.

Once again, his fingers strayed along his scar, moved gingerly over the ever-tender lid of his bad left eye.

A dark oath welled up inside him, but he willed it away. Now was not the time for pity. And in truth, his scars were nothing compared to the deep ones Lady Catherine carried inside.

His were on the outside for all to see, while hers were hidden within.

Unseen and grave, but by no means permanent like his.

Hers could be erased.

Banished with time, care, and the abiding love of a man willing to give her his heart.

And able to conquer hers.

Squaring his mail-clad shoulders, he made a pact with the silent night. "I will vanquish her scars and win her love," he vowed, the distant stars and the cold, dark sea his only witnesses.

"And none shall stop me," he said to the bleakness in his heart as much as to the blackness surrounding him.

Not even her own sweet, proud self.

Chapter 7

In the gloom of earliest morning, nothing stirred in Dunlaidir's cobbled bailey save thick tendrils of mist curling along the ground and drifting between the stronghold's deserted outbuildings like a phalanx of spectral sentries.

Nothing disturbed the breaking day except the hiss and zing of Marmaduke's sword arcing through the silence. A furious onslaught aimed at the demons ever lurking at the darkest edge of his soul.

Fiends eager to mock him with every disappointment, failure, or loss he'd ever had to bear.

And so he fought on, the whoosh of his blade echoing again and again in the empty bailey, a fierce battle cry against a fate that had been anything but kind.

Then, his unseen tormentors besieged at last, the fire in his gut quenched for another day, he lowered his steel and drew a deep breath of the chill, tang-kissed air.

Chill, damp air, brisk and invigorating.

Flavored with hard-won peace.

Blessed quiet marred only by the fog-muffled roar of the sea, his own heavy breathing, and the faint rustlings of someone slinking about behind him.

Swinging around, he caught a movement in the shadows even as a long-bladed dagger sped toward him. With a swift agility few could match, he hurled himself to the side just as the blade whistled past his shoulder and skittered to a halt not two feet from where he'd stood a moment before.

"Ho!" His sword at the ready, he ran toward the sounds of a scuffle, chaos erupting all around him. Shouts rang out from above as Sir Lachlan and Dunlaidir's seneschal tore down the outer stairs in hot pursuit of a third man now racing toward the farthest seaward wall.

Fast gaining on him, they chased the intruder, drawing swords as they ran. Marmaduke pursued a dark-cloaked figure using the confusion to flee along the bailey wall.

"Halt you!" he called, closing in on the man. "Cast down your blade and show yourself."

The figure stopped but crouched deeper into the murk rather than come forward. "I have no blade," he rapped out, anger crackling in his voice. "I've been disarmed."

Only then did Marmaduke see the discarded broadsword, its gleaming length bright against the mist-dampened cobbles. His gaze on the cloaked figure, he kicked the sword aside. "Your name," he demanded, approaching the other. "Speak lest I force you."

At the answering silence, Marmaduke hoisted the interloper a good foot off the ground, pinning him roughly against the wall. "Who-are-you?" he bit out, emphasizing each word with a jab of his sword tip into the soft flesh beneath the man's chin. "Speak, or prepare to meet your Maker."

"God's bones, release me," the man wheezed, indignation blazing in his dark eyes. "I am James, lord of this holding."

Marmaduke loosened his hold but didn't release the man. Much as he wanted to. The swordless knave reeked fouler than an overripe cesspit."

"Lord of the castle, eh?" Marmaduke's brow arched upward. "'Tis a rare noble who smells so rank." Careful not to breathe too deeply, he used the tip of his blade to ease back the woolen cowl hiding the man's face.

Freed of the concealing hood, a much younger man than he'd expected shook back a thick mane of dark hair. The wretch glared at him from a face that would've been noble-looking indeed were it not so twisted in anger. More telling, he recognized the face from a painted likeness he'd seen earlier in the great hall.

"So you are James." He eyed the bristling lad, his gaze assessing. "The elusive young master of the castle."

"Aye," the youth snarled.

Easing him to the ground, Marmaduke lowered his sword. He clamped a comradely hand on James Keith's shoulder. "Sakes, lad, where do you sleep or can it be you never bathe?"

"'Tis not my stench." Panting, James wrenched free of Marmaduke's grip. "The foulness clung to the miscreant who tried to kill you. I saw him and another man crawl from one of the latrines and gave chase."

"The latrines?"

"Aye, just."

Marmaduke frowned, his mind racing. "Two men, you say?"

James nodded. "They took off in directions. I sent Sir John after one and I caught up with the other, your assailant, just as he sent his blade flying."

Marmaduke jerked his head toward the discarded sword. "How did you lose your blade?"

“We struggled.” A scowl darkened the younger man’s face and he blew out an agitated breath. “He was larger than me, and heavier. He knocked the sword out of my hand. I...” Trailing off, he cast a rankled glance across the bailey to where Lachlan and Eoghann engaged the intruder.

With apparent ease, they were backing him into the curtain wall. Clearly, the offal-encrusted assailant posed no threat to Lachlan and the surprisingly well-skilled seneschal.

Equally clear was James’ shame at being bested.

Marmaduke returned his attention to the troubled-faced lordling. “Mind you, had your watchfulness not alerted the keep, who knows what damage yon blackguard may have wrought.”

“I did naught but prove my ineptness.” Jerking around, James limped away, his humiliation slinking after him, as plain to see as the exaggerated way he dragged one leg.

Marmaduke started after him but froze when a sharp, pain-filled cry rent the air. Dunlaidir’s luckless heir forgotten, he spun around, his anger cresting at the scene unfolding on the far side of the bailey.

Atop the seaward wall, Eoghann grappled with the intruder, the furious clang of clashing steel giving voice to the ferocity of their struggle. Lachlan lay sagged against the base of the wall, a dark stain spreading across the left side of his tunic, his sword still clutched in his hand.

With an enraged roar, Marmaduke raced across the bailey. Relief flooded him when Lachlan raised a hand, flashed a weak smile.

“Tis no’ so bad,” he gasped, his gaze lifting to the wall-walk. “Help Eoghann. I will be fine...” he tailed off, clamped his hand again to his side.

Trusting Lachlan’s word, Marmaduke spun away and, in one fluid movement, vaulted up behind his would-be assassin, eager to give the varlet a fine taste of his metal. The man whirled on him, swinging his blade in a vicious arc meant to kill.

Marmaduke countered the blow with ease, deflecting his attacker’s sword with such force the man lurched wildly to the side. His eyes wide in stunned disbelief, he toppled through the unprotected notch between two of the wall’s merlons.

A keening scream, silenced almost before it’d begun, bore a blood-curdling testament to his fate.

Breathing hard, Marmaduke cast down his steel and peered over the wall. The man’s body sprawled spread-eagled across the jagged rocks far below, already slipping into the hungry sea.

His boat, a hide-covered coracle little bigger than a cockleshell, bobbed on the waves.

Marmaduke dragged his arm over his brow. “He must’ve scaled the

cliff, then climbed up a latrine chute to gain entry.”

“Black-hearted craven!” Eoghann raged beside him, his breathing labored. “’Tis a well-deserved end he met, smeared with dung. I ne’er trusted that one, a queersome fellow he was.”

“What?” Marmaduke glanced at the seneschal. “You knew him?”

“Aye.” Eoghann spit over the walling. “Cadoc was his name and he hailed from Wales. A knight errant he called himself. A misbegotten churl, I say.”

“Of a certainty,” Marmaduke agreed, frowning down at the dark expanse of sea. “Did he offer his services here?”

“That was the way of it.” Eoghann dragged his sleeve across his mouth. “Swore homage to old Lord Keith, but no sooner did my master fall ill, did the scoundrel up and vanish. Like the rest of them, to a man.

“Sorry lot.” Eoghann’s eyes glittered with contempt, his fury pouring out in a passionate flood. “Forsworn bastards. Selling their souls for a scatter of coin and a promise of land. Keith land. Or so that devil Sir Hugh planned, thinking to wrest Dunlaidir into his own clutches.”

Marmaduke’s jaw hardened. “The man is a disgrace to his noble blood. I swear to you he will not lay claim to a single stone of this holding.”

“His villainy in these parts is beyond telling,” Eoghann said, sheathing his sword. “He is worse than a ravening wolf.”

“He will soon regret his misdeeds.” Hot anger coursing through him, Marmaduke leapt from the wall. He dropped to one knee beside Lachlan. “So, my friend, let us see what’s been done to you.”

“’Tis but a scratch, I told you.” Lachlan looked up at him, the paleness of his face saying otherwise.

“I pray God you are right,” Marmaduke returned, hoping he hadn’t judged wrongly in racing past the lad to join Eoghann on the wall.

As carefully as he could, he eased Lachlan’s blood-soaked jerkin away from the still-bleeding wound, relief washing over him, swift and sweet, upon glimpsing the cleanness of the cut.

“God’s mercy, you are right,” he said, forcing a twinkle to his good eye. “It is only a flesh wound. I’m afraid you will live to survive many more such skirmishes.”

Lachlan smiled and pushed up on his elbows. “It pains me but a little,” he said, the tint of white around his lips giving lie to his brave words and smile.

“Hurting or no, you will spend a few days resting until you’ve fully recovered,” Marmaduke said, his voice a shade more gruff than usual.

“Aye, laddie, and it shouldn’t prove a hardship to stay abed with our fair ladies seeing to your comfort,” Eoghann teased him, dropping

down beside them. "Our good Lady Caterine has the touch of an angel."

She looked like an angel, too.

An earthbound one, sent down to tempt Marmaduke past all restraint.

Smothering a curse at the way his pulse leapt at the mere sight of her, he watched her approach, his smitten heart thundering as she crossed the bailey with Sir Alec, the oldest and most battle-torn of his men.

Alec's long-strided gait had her hurrying to keep pace and her haste sent the voluminous folds of her mantle billowing out behind her. The cloak's soft dove color blended so well with the gray of morn, she appeared to be walking on air.

Indeed, with curtains of mist swirling about her and her unbound hair flowing to her hips in a shimmering cascade of palest gold, she could pass for a Celtic goddess.

An ethereal being too beautiful for this world.

Too lovely by far for him.

Sure of it, he bit back an oath, way too aware of the fearsome sight he must make with his hair wild and his clothes sweat-soaked and stained with Lachlan's blood.

Not to mention his face.

Always his face.

Chapter 8

“I cannot see their faces through the fog, can you tell who is hurt?” Catherine glanced at the grim-cast man striding beside her. “Is it him? The Sassunach?”

“Strongbow?” The Highlander’s voice held unmistakable pride. “Nae, it willnae be him. He ne’er takes a scratch. The saints look out of him because he’s already taken his share of battle scars.” He winked at her. “And he’s that good.”

Aye, good. The knowledge came from nowhere and everywhere, lighting on her conscience only long enough to send a tremor rippling through her.

An odd tingling, not at all unpleasant and very much like the delicate shivers that had so surprised her when she’d touched his face on the battlements.

“Is aught amiss my lady?” The big man gave her a questioning look. “Shall I escort you back inside?”

“Nae.” Catherine shook her head. They’d almost reached the seaward wall. “I would see who’s been injured.”

A surge of inexplicable relief swept her when the Sassunach proved as unscathed as the Highlander predicted he’d be. Linnet’s champion knelt beside the youngest of his men, his face turned away from her, the ghost of a breeze ruffling his dark hair.

“Lady,” he said, without looking at her.

“Good sir,” she returned, near choking on the two words, for the tingling sensation had given way to an unaccustomed tightness in her throat and chest.

He shot a glance at her rough-hewn escort. “Any word of the second varlet?”

Alec shook his head. “We searched every inch of the keep, every passage and cranny, all the outbuildings,” he said, shrugging burly shoulders. “There’s some that say the young lord must’ve imagined a second man. I swear to you, if there was one, he must’ve left the same way he came for he’s nowhere to be found.”

“We’ll search again, nevertheless,” Sir Marmaduke said, peering at his man’s face for a long moment before he tore a strip of cloth from

the bottom of his tunic and pressed the wadded linen to Lachlan's wound.

Caterine shifted her weight, grateful he hadn't fixed her with such an intense stare, hadn't seen her eyes widen at the sight of him.

Mercy, he may well have knelt before her naked!

So indecently did his hose and dampened tunic cling to his hard-muscled frame.

Every rock-hewn plane.

Each bulging muscle.

As if to increase her discomfiture, the wind gusted then, lifting the side panel of his tunic to give her a bold glimpse at yet another of his bulging muscles.

A most masculine one.

She drew a quick breath, the sharp intake of air prompting him to glance at her. "The wound is clean," he said, clearly mistaking the reason for her gasp. "My young friend will survive this day and many more yet to come."

"Praise be." Caterine nodded, her heart hammering. His nearness, and the sheer male power of him, wove a spell around her, consuming her so fully she needed all her strength to wrench her gaze from him.

How could that be?

She didn't know and didn't want to consider the reasons.

Instead, she turned to the injured knight, and lowered herself to the ground beside him. She also forced a calm she didn't feel. Hoping no one would notice – especially the Sassunach – she reached for the injured Highlander's hand, seeking to banish the cold from his fingers with the warmth of her palms.

"Noble sir," she said, wishing *he* wasn't staring at her. She needed to take her mind off his disturbing English self and the curious way he unsettled her.

"Noble sir," she began again, focusing her attention on the pale-faced young knight, "would that Dunlaidir yet housed a full garrison. I would command them to scour the land and demand reparation for the shameful welcome you've received to my home."

As she'd hoped, Lachlan pushed to sit up straighter and color began seeping back into his face. "Think nothing of it, my lady," he said, the strength in his voice pleasing her. "I have seen worse blood-letting."

He slid a glance at the Sassunach. "Before we return to Kintail, we will raise men and means enough to spare you future trouble with such miscreants as we saw this morn."

"And I thank you for your chivalry." Caterine smoothed the sweat-dampened hair off his brow. "Your valor shall be long remembered."

Beside her, the Sassunach cleared his throat. "It was good of you to

come out here, my lady, but we must see Sir Lachlan inside."

"Of course, I came." Catherine stood, adjusted her cloak. She also did her best to ignore the rich deepness of the champion's voice, focusing instead on the unmistakable coloration of his birth-land.

A telltale accent that blessedly dashed the awe and relief whirling inside her ever since she'd spied his broad-shouldered self, unscathed and whole.

All male and glorious.

"We'll need wide strips of clean linen," he was saying, his voice irritating her now. Its Englishness offending her ears. "The most potent wine in your stores, valerian if you have-"

"I know what we'll need." She stood straighter, appalled by her snippy tone, but unable to keep the edge from her tongue. "I've run this household and others for many a year."

"I am sure you have, my lady."

"Indeed." She nodded once, clasped her hands before her.

Something inscrutable crossed his face then, but vanished in the time it took her to blink. She peered at him, trying to decipher the fleeting expression but he'd schooled his features into an unreadable mask.

No emotion showed at all save the concern for his friend reflecting in the brown depths of his good eye.

To her horror, though, other eyes stared at her over his shoulder.

Leering eyes.

Lust-filled English eyes and grasping hands.

Brutal hands tearing at her gown, ripping to shreds more than the linen of her kirtle and the tender flesh between her thighs.

She saw not the man who'd come to champion her, but many men. Barbarous marauders who'd not just defiled her body, but had crushed her soul.

And slain her first husband before her very eyes.

Blessedly, as the dread faces loomed nearer, a moan and tremor from Lachlan vanquished them.

"Who did this?" she asked, looking across the young knight to Eoghann.

"A Welshman named Cadoc," Sir Marmaduke supplied, ignoring that she'd asked the seneschal, and not him.

She blinked all the same. "Cadoc?"

"Aye, and it cost him dear." Eoghann spat, a fierce scowl darkening his weather-lined face. "He lost his life for craving English coin and the saints know what else was promised him."

"Sir Hugh." Catherine glanced at Sir Marmaduke. "He is behind this," she said, hoping her straight back hid her fear of an enemy powerful enough to breach Dunlaidir's walls. "He will be in a rage

since your arrival.”

“Raging will serve him little,” he said, pressing another handful of bunched cloth against Lachlan’s side. “No one will gain entry again. Not even in the unsavory manner this blackguard did. I will install an iron grid over the latrine chute opening.”

Caterine shuddered. “My stepson told us how he entered. Not that we wouldn’t have known after smelling – *ah* – seeing James. Rhona is preparing a bath for him.” She looked at Lachlan. “One for you, too, my lord.”

Lachlan blanched.

Alec glanced heavenward and pinched his nose. “Dinnae think to decline the lady’s offer, laddie,” he jested. “Your need of a good scrubbing is great.”

“His need?” Eoghann pushed to his feet and held his own sweat-drenched tunic out from his chest. “I warrant we could all use a proper soaking.”

“I shall have extra water heated,” Caterine said, all lady-of-the-castle now. “Baths will be readied for each of you.”

She didn’t look at the Sassunach, not trusting herself to do so while speaking of such intimacies, however commonplace.

Instead, she turned back to Lachlan, a half-smile curving her lips. “Once your wound is treated and sewn, you may rest in my late husband’s solar,” she said, holding up a hand when the young knight started to argue. “Sir, you were injured within the walls of my home. Do not deny me the honor of looking after you. It is my pleasure.”

“Come, my lady, I will see you inside.” Eoghann joined her. “I don’t trust those fool idlers in the kitchens to boil water lest I’m there to watch o’er them.”



THE MOMENT THEY MOVED AWAY, Alec gave Lachlan a bold wink. “I daresay it will be well worth losing a bit o’ blood if it means having the lady and her friend bathe you, eh?”

Leaning forward, he wiggled his ears. “You’re a lucky knave, laddie. I’d no’ mind two pairs o’ soft hands a-washing my old bones.”

“I am none too keen on a bath, sir.” Lachlan threw a glance to where Lady Caterine and the seneschal were just entering the stair tower. He flushed, his cheeks shining. “Nae, I dinnae want one.”

Marmaduke watched the exchange, his blood heating as well. But not in embarrassment.

He’d not mind two pairs of soft hands washing him, Alec had jested.

One pair would serve Marmaduke quite nicely.

The self-same hands whose light-as-air touch had filled him with

such wonderment when she'd traced her fingertips along his scar.

What bliss would he know were she to smooth those hands over the scars on his back? What rapture would be his were she to caress his aching muscles?

Most especially the one rearing to bold life beneath his braies.

"I can wash myself," Lachlan protested yet again.

"Ladies always tend injured men of the castle garrison," Marmaduke reminded him. "And esteemed guests."

Before the others could see just how much the lady stirred him, he leaned down and lifted Lachlan into his arms. "There is nothing shameful in letting them bathe and care for you, lad."

Lachlan didn't appear convinced. "'Tis the way of things, I know, but..."

"To refuse would be an insult," Marmaduke said, his tone closing the matter.

And so he carried his friend across the bailey, glad of the morning's cooling mist on his heated flesh. More grateful still, of the long years he'd spent learning to shield his emotions.

Chapter 9

Lusty, full of folly and sass.

Too fond by far of men of steel.

Swayed by smoldering gazes, her mind turned by heated dreams of warriors hewn of blood and fire.

Caterine stood in the comforting circle of warmth thrown out by the great arched fireplace in Dunlaidir's kitchens, a near-full pail of steaming water clutched in her hands, a dozen or more accusations burning the tip of her tongue.

And each one vied to be the first to fly at her meddlesome companion for bringing her to this pass.

Unfortunately, an equally damning charge, one aimed at her own foolish heart, kept her lips pressed together.

How could she scold Rhona when she was guilty of such yearnings herself?

Of late, her own dreams echoed with the allure of mail-clad men.

One mail-clad man in particular.

Outrageous imaginings that burst into bloom the instant she closed her eyes to sleep. Disturbing wanderings of the mind ever ready to pierce the cloak of indifference she attempted to wear by day.

Ice didn't run in her veins – as the bold Sassunach champion sadly reminded her.

Pushing him from her mind, she slanted a look at Rhona. Unaware of Caterine's agitation, her friend busied herself spreading thick woven matting around the bases of three wooden bathing tubs.

James, already submerged to his shoulders in one of the them, followed Lady Rhona's every move, his dark eyes carefully hooded to shield his adoration.

A condition Caterine suspected she alone was aware of.

"This should do it," Eoghann's gravelly voice drew her attention as he filled a small bucket with hot water from an iron cauldron suspended over the cook fire. Striding toward Caterine, he carefully tipped the bucket's steaming contents into her larger pail.

Newly bathed himself, but with cold water drawn from the cistern just beyond the kitchen wall, the seneschal returned the scooping

bucket to its hook above the hearth.

"The good sirs will have baths worthy of any great lord's hall," he said, pride in his voice.

"And you, dear sir, should not have to serve as a common bathman." Guilt pricked her at seeing the loyal retainer thus demoted.

"Nor should you be doing the work of a kitchen lad, my lady." The deep voice, so English yet irresistibly compelling, laid fast claim to the torch-lit kitchens and all within the vast, smoke-stained walls.

"Oh!" Catherine whirled around, hot water spilling onto the floor. The Sassunach stood in the open doorway, the stone-walled passage to the keep looming dark behind him. Fire glow from the wall torches gilded the length of him, emphasizing the wide set of his shoulders and his great height.

With his injured friend cradled in his arms, he looked more the lord of the castle than her late husband ever had, even in his best years.

A wave of heat washed over Catherine, an inner blaze that had nothing to do with the room's smoky warmth.

She'd half-dreaded, half-desired this moment ever since the need to offer heated baths arose. Yet now her heart lodged in her throat and despite her best efforts, she couldn't squeeze the simplest greeting past her lips.

"Set down the pail," the champion said, and she obeyed, any refusal she may have attempted, undone by the intensity of his gaze.

Stayed as well by the obvious care with which he held his friend, for he displayed a depth of concern even she couldn't deny. A shame the portent, that he possessed a good heart, held ramifications she didn't care to consider.

"You shouldn't carry pails, my lady." His glance flicked to the bucket, then back to her. "For sure, not one filled with steaming water."

"I have carried worse."

"Those days are behind you."

"That remains to be seen." Catherine lifted her chin. "Dunlaidir is a stronghold unlike others."

"So it is." He remained on the threshold, his fierce gaze locked on hers. "And you concern me more than any walls of stone, my lady."

"Oh." Catherine blinked, not sure what to say.

She wasn't used to chivalry.

Even Leo appeared confused. The little dog barked once, then scurried away to a dark corner where he scooted beneath a chair to growl at the newcomer from a safe distance.

"God's eyes, man, put me down." Lachlan squirmed in the champion's arms. "I've but a wee scratch and you coddle me as if I've

lost a limb."

"You well could have. Be glad." Sir Marmaduke eased the strapping young knight onto one of the benches set against the wall as if he weighed no more than a sack of goose feathers.

His friend comfortably settled, if scowling at the unwanted attention, he crossed the kitchen with long, purposeful strides, reaching Catherine's side before she could blink.

Without a word, he took her hands. Turning them, he trailed the backs of his fingers over her reddened palms.

"Lady, I will not allow your hands to grow as calloused as a scullion's," he vowed, again glancing at the discarded pail. "Not for any reason."

A tense silence descended, a quiet so heavy Catherine could almost hear her heart knocking against her ribs.

"I've told her the same myself," Eoghann declared, breaking the spell. He flashed a look at Catherine's tub-bound stepson. "Isn't that the way of it?"

"Aye." James nodded. "We still have servants enough to see to such tasks would she allow them to do so."

A grin spreading across his face, the seneschal bobbed his head. "See?" He beamed at the English knight. "It gladdens my ears to hear you tell her so. She won't listen to us. Perhaps she'll heed you."

"I shall do my best to convince her," Sir Marmaduke said, the warmth of his hands on hers near scattering her wits and sending dangerously delicious tingles up her arms.

"Honeyed words do not sway me," she said, her defiant tone aided by the ill-timed surfacing of other Sassunach voices.

Harsh male voices ordering her to do their will lest they suffer more sorrow on her than the mere taking of their pleasure. Catherine tamped down a shudder, memories plaguing her – distant terrors, resurrected by the Englishness of the man who sought to champion her.

With a speed borne of her shame, she yanked her hands from his grasp, snatched the water pail and dumped its contents into the nearest bathing tub.

"Done!" She let the empty bucket slip from her fingers and met Sir Marmaduke's calm gaze with a long hard stare. For good measure, she tossed an equally hot glare at the seneschal.

"Bonnie words and courtly airs are purest folly," she said, her temper spurred on by a parade of leering faces rising cruelly from the depths of her soul. "I stopped listening to such foolery at a tender age and will not be persuaded to do so again."

She paused, set her hands on her hips. "Most especially not from English lips."

To her mortification, a flare of sympathy, or perhaps regret, flashed across Sir Marmaduke's scarred face. Coolly ignoring her outburst, he simply lifted a brow.

"Dare I suggest, my lady, that the fools who tried in vain to impress you did not possess deep enough hearts to put enough of their own into winning yours?"

His words, smooth and rich, embraced her, beguiling her with startling ease and pouring warmth and light into corners of her soul that had never known a shred of gallantry.

She opened her mouth to say something, anything, but he'd already moved to stand before James' washtub, his withdrawal leaving her oddly bereft.

It was as if all the light in the kitchen had followed him, leaving her to stand alone in the dark. Even the warmth of the cook fire seemed to have cooled.

Waving away Eoghann's concern when he peered oddly at her, she stared after the Sassunach, uncomfortably touched by his silvered words, the tingles still rippling across her palms and up and down her arms.

He seemed unaware of the turmoil he'd stirred in her. His features controlled, he addressed her stepson. "Sir Alec and several others are making a renewed search of the castle and grounds. If a second intruder yet lurks here, they will find him."

James stopped lathering his hair. "I was mistaken," he said, casting a glance at Rhona than meet Marmaduke's gaze. "There was only one."

Paying scant heed to their exchange, Catherine stared down at the toppled pail. Water trickled over its rim to form a growing stain on the stone floor.

A stain as dark as the one stamped so indelibly on her heart.

A heart she could not give to an Englishman – much as she might be persuaded.

I am a man of boundless patience.

She tensed in surprise. The words, his words, had sounded so clearly as if he'd murmured them in her ear. Yet he still stood across the room, calmly speaking with her stepson.

Not sharing private revelations meant for none but her to hear.

Rest easy, my lady. I revere and respect women. Never would I force you to do aught against your will.

The words came again. Less substantial than an angel's sigh, but oh-so-sweet, they slid past her ear to caress a part of her no man had ever before touched.

Imagined words.

"I promise you, it is only your own heart's desire I would see

done.”

Not imagined.

Simply low-voiced and smooth.

Seductive.

And irrevocably English.

Despite herself, Catherine basked in the warmth of his assurances. Real or not, they ignited yearnings she'd held back too long. She looked up, expecting to see his all-knowing gaze fixed on her, but he merely turned away from James' washtub with a half-shrug.

As pleases you, my lady, she thought she heard him say, but already he'd returned to his friend's side. He stood with his broad back to her, whatever emotions might plague him, hidden from view.

Eoghan walked away as well, mumbling to himself about chores needing his attention.

And so Catherine was left alone – or so it seemed, not that she wished to complain.

She welcomed the peace to recover from the Sassunach's silvered words. Imagined or otherwise, they'd touched her deeply. And that meant one thing...

She'd need to shield her heart.

How frightening that she doubted she could.

Chapter 10

“Y on water grows cold and our guests await their ease,”

Rhona’s voice seemed to come from a great distance.

“Aye, I know.” Catherine nodded, her attention on the tall knight standing near the bathing tubs. He was unbuckling his sword belt and the simple act struck her as so blatantly intimate.

A strange prickling began deep in the lowest part of her belly. A warm pulsing that grew and spread the longer she watched his hands work at the low-slung belt’s buckle.

He caught her staring and tilted his head, calmly watching her watch him. “You did not expect us to bathe in our soiled clothes?” he asked, and the heavy leather belt came free.

“Nae, of course not.”

“Then all is as it should be.” His lips quirked, a half smile.

“Aye.” Catherine clasped her hands before her, nodded once.

His smile deepened. “Good, then.”

But when he reached the hem of his dark-stained tunic, her nerves shattered. She swung around, almost colliding with the fly-catcher, a honey-dipped rope hanging from the ceiling.

Embarrassed by her clumsiness, she swatted the dangling nuisance out of her way and stared pointedly into the cook fire. Its flames crackled loudly, wholly unaware of the mad whirling of her senses. Tongues of red and gold licking innocently at the fat logs piled on the blackened hearthstone.

Her heart began a hard thudding.

The look he’d fixed on her had been anything but innocent.

The *clunk* of his belt dropping on the floor, a direct challenge.

The sound of his tunic being drawn over his head, an affront that sent streaks of excitement straight to the deep-seated core of pure female need she hadn’t been aware she possessed until this moment.

Stretching her hands to the fire, she used the pretense of warming them to keep her back to him and the two empty bathing tubs looming so close behind her.

One soon to be occupied by him, *naked*.

Her face flamed at the notion, her entire body heating.

Then another sword belt hit the floor, followed by the soft rustlings of a second tunic being stripped off.

Lachlan's belt and tunic.

Or the younger knight's belt and the Sassunach's hose, for the soft rustling sounds could just as well have been Sir Marmaduke rolling down his leggings.

"'Twas only my young friend's shirt," his richly timbred voice solved the mystery.

And proved to Catherine he could indeed read her thoughts.

Beside her, Rhona held her hands to the flames. "It doesn't become you to appear so inhospitable, my lady."

"Oh, come." Catherine shrugged out of her cloak. "Would I have poured the last of our precious lavender and thyme oils into their bath water or lined the tubs with fine linen did I not wish to see them comfortable?"

"You have not exactly encouraged them to enjoy the warmth of your welcome."

"Pah." Catherine tossed her cloak onto a nearby bench. "Were I as ungracious as you claim, I'd not have hung our best drying cloths near the fire so they may dry themselves with warmed toweling."

"There are more ways to warm a man than by offering him heated bath linens."

"Is that so?"

"Oh, aye." Rhona smiled, her eyes lighting. "The possibilities are endless."

Then share them, a silent voice pleaded from the most secret corner of Catherine's heart.

As if she'd heard, Rhona's gaze slid to James. "Watch how I bathe him. You would be wise to show your champion the same care."

"I have bathed enough men—" Catherine began, breaking off when her friend walked away. "Wait! I am the one to always assist James..."

Left alone, the ancient laws of hospitality swept down on her shoulders, a crushing weight, sacred and not to be ignored.

She did swallow hard, tried to ignore the blood rushing in her ears. Mercy, the intimacies she must grant the English knight rode her conscience, as real as if she'd already dipped her hands into his bath water and, even now, slid them over his soapy-wet skin.

In truth, he merely leaned against the far wall, watching her, branding her with the heat of his stare. Raw masculinity poured off him, and just being in the same room with him made every inch of her thrum with crackling anticipation.

Turning aside, she smoothed her hands on her skirts.

I have nothing to fear – I have seen scores of unclothed men.

The backs and the fronts of them. She mouthed the words, a silent

litany, her palms growing more damp with each beat of her heart.

She had no cause for alarm.

Many were the visiting knights and nobles she'd granted such attentions over the years.

"'Tis but a custom, my lady," came his voice again. Deep, smooth, and much nearer. "A token courtesy, the execution of which means nothing."

Caterine's pulse skittered at his words. He erred. The extending of this particular courtesy would cost her much. And not in the way he'd believe were she to voice her hesitation.

Her willingness sealed, she locked her gaze on his. He stood not four paces away, one arm slung about his friend's bare shoulders, his own broad chest equally clothes-free.

And so perfect, her knees went liquid at the sight.

His hard-muscled magnificence, every taut well-defined plane, stole her breath and sent a floodtide of stunned surprise spiraling through her.

Wave upon wave of something so intense, so thoroughly different from anything she'd ever experienced, she could only stand and stare at him.

A dusting of crisp dark hair arrowed down the sculpted tautness of his abdomen to disappear beneath the rolled waistband of his braies. The light woolen cloth, still damp from his rigors in the bailey, hugged his muscular thighs and clung to his maleness in such a brazen manner, nary a secret remained about the grandness of his virility.

Finding her voice at last, Caterine gasped.

He smiled.

A slow and lazy half-smile of such bone-melting potency, the wonder of it reached clear inside her soul to the secret place her gasp had come from.

The place she hid her dreams.

He hid nothing.

And nothing could stop the waves of tight-pitched anticipation spilling through her, the longer she stared.

"Merciful saints," she breathed at last.

"They had nary a hand in it, I assure you," he said, a bitter edge marring the beauty of his voice. Slicing through the mysterious bond his oh-so-seductive gallantry had been weaving of her long-slumbering desires.

Hopes and dreams so deeply buried, she'd forgotten she'd ever spun them.

Lifting a hand to his face, he trailed long fingers down the scar slashing across his left cheekbone. "Dear lady, the good saints had their backs turned the day I was thus blighted, but they watch over

me now, I assure you.”

“I am sure they do.”

“And as they guard me, so shall I protect you.” He skimmed his knuckles down the curve of her cheek. “Your person, your home and people, your sensibilities.”

“My sensibilities?”

He nodded.

Dear God, he said no more. He just looked at her in that way he had, the one that set her blood to racing. Could it be knew? Did he sense the arousal he stirred in her?

If so, what should she do?

She didn’t know, so she said the only thing that sprang to her mind. “The bath water will chill.”

When he still said nothing, she gestured to the bathing tubs, the steam rising from them undoing her supposed concern. “It would be a shame-”

“A great shame, yes.” He stepped closer, lifted her face with a single finger beneath her chin. “And we shall speak of such matters another time, when we are alone.”

He lowered his hand then, and strode away.

And ridiculous as it was, she wanted to hurry after him.



MARMADUKE IGNORED every warning his good sense roared at him, even the knots twisting in his gut, and spun about, returning to Lady Catherine in three quick strides.

He towered over her, not bothering to clear the frown he knew would be creasing his brow. The saints knew, all the brow-clearing in the world wouldn’t make his face less fierce.

It was, what it was.

He was, who he was.

He did resist the urge to lift a hand and stroke her hair. Instead, he looked deep into her eyes, drew a long breath. “Lady, the bathing ceremony is a much appreciated custom among men of breeding, but I am not an old done man incapable of tending my own needs.”

There is naught old and done about me, his heart added, demanding her ear.

Her eyes widened, her mouth forming a little ‘o’ – as if she’d heard the silent words.

“Nor am I injured,” he said, encouraged. “I can bathe myself.”

“I am sorry.” She had the good grace to blush, and her discomfiture turned her eyes a deeper shade of blue.

So dark a blue, he released her at once lest he drown in their

sapphire depths.

She touched his arm. "You truly do not mind?"

"And if I did?"

She hesitated but a moment. "Then I would oblige you."

"But not willingly."

"Willing, aye," she said, surprising him. "But not happily."

A pang of bitterness shot through him at her frankness. "Then we shall wait."

"Wait?" She blinked. "Wait for what?"

Marmaduke allowed himself a wry smile. "Until you attend my bath because it is your will to do so."

"My will?"

"So I have said." He smoothed a few strands of pale gold hair off her forehead. "Your will and your desire."

Her brows arched, but before she could say a word, he went to the only washtub yet unoccupied. Without further ceremony, and certainly without shame, he undid the cord to his underhose and shoved them to his ankles.

Something fierce and hot leapt inside him then. A bold need that made him stand thus a shade longer than was chivalrous. The sheerest moment only, but long enough for her to note the one part of himself he knew to be unflawed and impressive.

Only then did he kick aside his discarded braies and ease himself into the large wooden tub.

Heated water swirled around him as he settled onto the low bathing stool, the bath's scented warmth lapping at his shoulders and sending him the comfort he'd rather find in her soothing embrace.

Her will and her desire. Anything less was unacceptable. Those truths circling in his head, he leaned against the linen-covered edge of the washtub, and released a long, tension-freeing sigh.

He was a patient man.

He would make her want him.

Love him.

Unlike the fools who'd sought to woo her before and failed, he possessed a deep enough heart to succeed.

Fending off the dark quibbles of doubt springing to life at his bold assumptions, he drew his hand down over his face and closed his eyes.

Then he laid calm siege to his doubts, routing his demons one by one before they could argue otherwise.



ABOUT THE SAME TIME, in a far and dark corner of Dunlaidir, two heavily cloaked figures huddled in the dank chill of a long-empty

storeroom.

A damp undercroft in one of the castle's most neglected towers, once used to house all manner of goods but now filled with little save dust and cobwebs.

Murky light fell through two narrow air slits, faintly illuminating the scowling face of one of the two figures. "Your regrets come over-late," the figure said, taking up a position at the storeroom's heavy oak door. "My patience thins.

"So heed me well. If you are caught escaping, and dare utter my name, I shall see every man, woman, and child who bear a drop of your blood, put to the sword." The speaker thrust out a warning finger. "You have my solemn oath on it."

The other, a thick-set man of squat stature and reeking like a cess-pit, grimaced. "You have every right to be angry," he said, "but the attempt was doomed from the start. How could we know the young lordling would choose that moment to visit the jakes?"

"How, indeed?" The other man's voice remained cold. "Nor do I care. If you would stay in my peace, and your lord's, then I warn you not to fail again."

The stocky man patted his sword-hilt. "On my life, I swear I won't."

"Your life, aye. That is as sure as a buzzard rides the updraughts," the other said, and cracked the door just enough to peer out into the fog-hung morning.

Turning back to the dung-crusted figure, he continued, "Word is that he brought a special dispensation from the Bishop of Aberdeen allowing them to wed with all haste. See to it he never gains the chance."

The squat man shuffled his feet on the hard-packed earthen floor. "Men say the saints watch o'er him, keeping him from harm."

The other gave a snort of contempt. "He is cunning, naught else. And wise enough to know your liege will be aware of his moves. He will make a careful circuit of the walls when the day of his nuptials dawns. No doubt of the village as well, if Sir Hugh and his men fail to appear."

"How are we to dispatch him if we aren't there?"

The figure by the door let out a long, slow breath. "You will be there. But not in full knightly regalia as he will expect."

Opening the door just wide enough for the other to slip through, the dark-cloaked figure swelled with the scent of victory. "Tell Sir Hugh to send his best men to hide behind every bush and tree. I will assure the one-eyed whoreson passes close enough to be cut down."

The other opened his mouth, but before he could speak, the figure by the door gave him a rough shove, hurling him into the bailey's

rain-misted gloom.

“Go now,” the figure called after the hurrying man. “My salutations to your lord.”

Chapter 11

“**M**ust I repeat myself times without number?” James Keith

grasped the armrests of the laird’s chair and glowered at those unfortunate enough to be within sighting range. “You badgered me before my bath, now I’ve scarce washed the dung from my limbs and you’d harry me anew.”

Anger glittering in his eyes, he slammed the flat of his hand onto the high table’s scarred surface. “I’ve been defeated once this morn, would you see me beaten down by a hail of questions as well?”

Dunlaidir’s few remaining men-at-arms, so sparse in number they barely filled the nearest trestle tables, exchanged glances but said nothing. Marmaduke’s own men, urged by the young lordling to join him at the dais end of the hall, stared at their trenchers or reached for their tankards.

Ill ease hung in the air, palpable and thick as the smell of wood-smoke and soured ale. Two of the Keith men feigned coughing spells. Others shifted in their seats, clearly uncomfortable.

“For the last time, there was only one,” James ground out, anger rolling off him in black waves.

Sir Marmaduke watched him from the shadows near the bottom steps of the turnpike stair. As casually as possible, he folded his arms and leaned one mail-clad shoulder against the tapestry-hung wall.

The young lord’s anger didn’t surprise him, but his avoidance of meeting the others’ eyes, made his pulse quicken with alertness.

A sharply honed warrior’s instinct, ignited because James only averted his gaze when stating he’d seen but one intruder and not two as he’d originally claimed.

“’Tis plaguey sad when the new lord shies away from matters of such grave import,” groused a stern-faced man-at-arms at one of the tables.

“New lord ... *faugh!*” someone else scoffed. “The whelp would sooner open the hall door to the English than draw steel on ’em!”

“It would require more than steel to defeat a man as cunning as Hugh de la Hogue.” Sir John, a tired-looking noble of middle years, glanced over his shoulder at the grumbling men-at-arms. “He is

merciless, gives no quarter to any who dare to challenge him. God the Father himself would be hard-pressed to help those Sir Hugh chooses to ruin."

He slid James a dark look. "If the dastard so desired, he'd slight this holding with a fury so fierce naught but a few scattered stones would remain."

"That's why it's so sad we have such a weak-hearted poltroon as new lord!" a riled voice rose from one of the other tables.

All color drained from James' face. When his jaw began working in agitation, but no words came forth, Marmaduke raked a hand through his still-damp hair. Stifling a curse, he started forward at the same time Catherine pushed to her feet.

Her back straight, her pride glowing as brightly as the gleaming gold braids coiled over her ears, she stared accusingly at the Dunlaidir men. "Is it not a greater sorrow that we need the sword arms of a braw English knight and his men to stave off the havoc and disaster you dread, good sirs?"

Her words froze Marmaduke's feet.

Had she truly called him braw?

She had.

And his heart surged, all manner of possibilities racing through him as he stepped from the shadows.

"Where is loyalty and honor when more than half our garrison abandon us to face every peril alone?" As yet unaware of his approach, Catherine Keith challenged the men who's shamed her stepson. "Where were you when James chased after the intruder? His daring was not the act of a weakling."

Some of the men-at-arms lowered their heads, clearly shamed. Others drew their brows together in further annoyance and continued to mutter among themselves.

Sir John frowned, lines etched deep into his haggard features. Lost in his own thoughts, he absently slipped bits of cheese to the dogs scrounging in the rushes beneath the high table.

The tiniest dog, Lady Catherine's pet, ceased his scavenging to bare his teeth at Marmaduke. Ignoring the wee beastie's snarls, he stepped up to the table and placed a hand on Catherine's shoulder.

"Sir." She glanced up at him, her deep blue eyes still sparking with agitation, but to his relief, she made no move to pull away. "My apologies that the hall is not at peace."

"Men sit at your tables, my lady," Marmaduke said, speaking to her, but nodding to her men. "That is worth much. Disloyal retainers do not stay on when they could dine off silver plate elsewhere. Good men stay on through all weathers, as these here have clearly chosen to do." As he'd hoped, his words wiped a fair portion of the ill-humor

from their faces.

"'Tis looking after the horses, we were," one of them called out, his gaze on Caterine. "Some of us thought we saw lights flickering in the stables. We are too few to be everywhere, my lady."

"He has the rights of it," another agreed. "We ne'er thought some craven would come climbing out of the jakes!"

Nods and hearty blusters echoed the voiced sentiments, and the tension gradually dissipated. Satisfied, Marmaduke looked back at Lady Caterine.

His breath caught at her radiance. She was staring past him, looking at the garrison men. Flickering torchlight silhouetted her profile, gilding the elegant lines of her face and the proud lift of her chin.

Her dignity stirred him, but the vulnerability evident in the flush high on her cheeks moved him more. Something rare and potent slid through him, seizing hold of his very soul.

He watched her, his heart pounding slow and hard. The smoky hall and all in it seemed to merge with the shadows until only she remained, clear and bright as a sunlit day.

The disgruntled Keith men, his amused-looking ones, and even the rows of tables and benches, everything faded save his keen awareness of her.

She stood tall and proud, the fireglow caressing her, the shifting light and shadow revealing the sleek lines of her body, teasing him with the pleasing fullness of her breasts, and tempting him with a subtle sensuality any man would burn to awaken.

Already intrigued by her, he now found himself captivated.

He fisted his hands around his sword belt as desire slammed through him. His body tightened, responding to her with gripping need. A yearning far more powerful than the well-rounded wenches he'd favored in recent years had ever stirred in him.

The saints knew he'd avoided slender coupling partners, hadn't craved the supple curves of a lithe-limbed woman in years. Not since-

Frowning, he gripped his belt even harder, his knuckles now white. Anything to banish the image rising in his mind – and the sharp lust heating his blood. A throbbing ache much deeper than mere physical want.

"Aye, and 'tis full loyal we are," a loud voice rang out, dashing cold water on his need and soundly dispelling memories better left unstirred.

"Not all can be turned by coin or cowed by that son of Beelzebub!" another agreed.

Others joined in and the disruption poured relief through Marmaduke, swiftly restoring his wits and resealing his most tender

wound.

The one that bore his late wife's name.

Drawing a great breath, he gave his new bride's shoulder a light squeeze. And knew profound satisfaction when she leaned into his hand, welcoming his touch.

"Such stalwarts are worth two of every knave who left," he told her, his voice a shade huskier than usual. "Do not fret their loss. Sometimes it is wise to concede a battle if in doing so, we achieve later victory in the war."

James pinned him with a glare. "Did you come here to champion us with your brawn, sir, or would you impress us with your bottomless wisdom?"

Caterine gasped at her stepson's rudeness, flashed a look at Marmaduke. "I am so sorry."

"No need," he said, lowering his voice so only she heard him. Then, he turned back to her stepson. "A man worth his salt makes use of both – muscle and his wits."

James' face darkened. "Are you saying I have neither?"

"James, please-" Caterine began, but Marmaduke pressed her shoulder, urging her to hold her tongue as James pushed to his feet.

"Nae, sir, do not trouble yourself to say more," he bristled, drawing up before Marmaduke. "I already know the answer."

He gave Marmaduke one more furious look, then stormed from the table, his hobbling gait more pronounced than ever – only it was his good leg that he dragged behind him.



"MERCY!" Caterine stared after her stepson, her eyes rounding. "He's dragging the wrong-"

"Leave him be." Sir Marmaduke tightened his grip on her shoulder when she tried to wrench free. "Only after he's faced his dragons and laid them to rest, will he be able to rise high enough above himself to win yon men's respect."

"And I suppose you are well-practiced at winning men's esteem?"

A ghost of a smile touched his lips. "So some say."

"He wins the ladies, too," Sir Alec boasted, plunking down his ale mug. The crusty Highlander dragged his sleeve over his mouth. "Steals their hearts afore they ken what hit 'em, he does."

"Their hearts and all else they toss after him," another added with a bold wink. Others shouted agreement, Dunlaidir men joining in the ribaldry as well, until the remaining tension faded amidst a flood of ever bawdier jesting.

"...he's so bi- er – well-blessed, none of the ladies will even glance

at the rest of us after he's-"

"God's bones, Ross, hold your tongue," Marmaduke's commanding voice carried clear to the inky dark corners of the hall.

His man, a ruddy-faced Highlander, shrugged burly shoulders but appeared anything but abashed. "A spellcaster, he is!" he called out, slapping his thigh. "Charmed Arabella, charms 'em all."

The more vocal among those present roared approval and a swell of chortles tripped down the length of the high table and beyond.

Caterine caught every word, wished she could plug her ears as the Sassunach's men boasted of his prowess, his many conquests.

Visibly paling, he released her shoulder at once. "'Fore God, that's enough!" The massed power pouring off him silenced his men as much as the heat of his words.

Bracing his hands on his hips, he raked the lot of them with a fearsome stare. "Have you forgotten there are ladies present? Think well before you speak, my friends."

"Beg pardon, my lady," a bearded Highlander said, half-rising off his bench. "'Tis a hard-bitten lot we are, no' always fit for a lady's hall."

The others were quick to agree, but Caterine scarce heard their gruff but well-meant apologies nor her own murmured acceptance, for other words echoed in her heart.

Some sent heat inching up the back of her neck, others pinched deep into a hitherto unknown streak of feminine awareness.

Big, the ruddy-faced MacKenzie had meant to boast.

Well-blessed, he'd amended.

Caterine's face flamed. The English knight was both, as she'd seen.

With startling clarity, the Highlander's words summoned the unhindered view she'd had of Sir Marmaduke's naked maleness in the moments before he'd settled into his bath.

A glimpse that revealed a splendid array of manhood.

And he'd been fully at ease.

Dear heavens.

Caterine's heart flip-flopped and her mouth went dry. Something deep inside her contracted to a tight and hollow ache. The recalled image, even in a relaxed state, weighted her belly with a pulsing warmth. Imagining him at need, fully aroused, filled her with a greedy, demanding hunger she'd never believed existed until now.

"Do not heed their foolery, my lady," he spoke at last, the deep smoothness of his voice warming her soul as surely as remembering his male perfection stirred her body. "They forget themselves at times."

As she'd forgotten herself, her mind filling with wickedness.

Embarrassed, she drew a shaky breath, the image of his nakedness

still emblazoned across her mind's eye. She blinked, awakening as if from a haze.

"Lady?" He was peering oddly at her. "Are you unwell?"

"No." She shook her head, aware that everyone in the hall was staring at her. "I am fine, truly."

His brow arced upward. "You are sure?"

"Yes." She nodded. "I was only-"

"You appeared dazed."

I was. I am. Catherine touched her cheek, not surprised to find it hot. "I have been a bit unsettled in recent times," she admitted, hoping he wouldn't guess why.

"Strongbow does that to all the ladies," one of his men blurted, then slapped the table.

The others chuckled, their bearded faces splitting in grins.

It was a quick outburst, but enough to shatter the strange intensity charging the air between her and Linnet's champion.

Conversation resumed at the tables. Everyday sounds of men tucking into what humble offerings Dunlaidir's kitchens could place before them. Platters of bread and cheese, barley gruel, and for those lucky enough to be sitting in the upper hall, stewed cockles and, set here and there along the tables, small dishes of spiced almonds. Ordinary fare and noise that underscored how swiftly her sense of normalcy had changed since the English knight's arrival.

Acutely aware of him, Catherine lifted a hand to her shoulder. Though he'd released her, the tingling warmth where his fingers had pressed against her yet lingered. She also couldn't help but notice how light from a nearby wall torch glossed his thick, dark hair, and - of course - how that same shimmering light danced across his mailed shoulders, drawing attention to his powerful build. The masculine strength that made her pulse skitter.

As if he knew, he smoothed the back of his fingers down the curve of her cheek and the tingles spread, tumbling through her in a cascade of pleasure clear to her toes.

"You mustn't let my men unsettle you," he said, lifting away his hand. "They are rogues and have rough manners."

You unsettle me, she wanted to say, but the hint of an amused gleam in his good eye held her tongue.

And made her bold.

Daring enough to challenge the sensations he'd awakened in her.

"Is it true, then?"

"What, my lady?"

"The things whispered about you." Catherine held his gaze, glad when Eoghann skirted round her and plunked down a platter of roasted seabird. The rich smell of the savory gannet meant staved off

curious glances.

Heart pounding, she leaned in. "Are you a spell-caster? A charmer of women as your men claim?"

An amused smile curved his lips as he caught her hand and began massaging her palm with his callused thumb. "I would rather leave that for you to decide," he said, releasing her. "Perhaps one day soon you will give me your opinion."

"I shall," Catherine blurted, too flustered by the delicious prickling sensation dancing across her palm to remember what else she'd wanted to ask him.

Still smiling, he seized her hand once more, this time placing a kiss on the inside of her wrist.

At her quick intake of breath, his smile deepened to reveal a set of most appealing dimples. Two vertical creases running from mid-cheek to just below the corners of his mouth, and as charming as his scar was daunting.

But they vanished as quickly as they'd appeared. Without a further word, he turned and strode off into the shadows.

Only then did she remember what else she'd wanted to know.

Arabella.

The woman his men said he'd charmed.

"Who is Arabella?" her lips formed the unspoken question.

Three silent words to taunt her.

A name to temper the fluttery excitement his touch and his dimples had left behind.

Who is Arabella? This time her heart asked.

And more importantly, why was she so desperate to know?

Chapter 12

A *braw English knight.*

Lady Catherine's words swirled around Sir Marmaduke as he strode through Dunlaidir's great hall. Sweet praise to flatter him, a simply stated comment bursting with possibilities and hope.

The same kind of elation a drowning man must feel when tossed a rope.

Braw, she'd said.

Marmaduke's heart swelled.

No maid had called him thus since he'd been blighted by his scar.

Slowing his steps, he considered abandoning his plan to seek out her ill-humored stepson and attempt to cure the young man's aches. He frowned, tamping down the urge to return to the high table, fetch his new lady, haul her into his arms, and see to tending his own woes.

And hers.

But while her words beckoned, the expression she'd worn after he'd kissed her wrist had him quickening his step. Wonder and bewilderment had filled her sapphire eyes and the memory of both rode hard on his shoulders.

Her wonder made him want to tear away the cool restraint she kept wrapped around herself and awaken her womanhood with as many soul-stealing kisses as it cost him.

The bewilderment signaled the need to woo her gently. Catherine Keith's passion would require finesse, skill, and infinite patience.

So he strode on, searching the shadows for James and calling on every shred of his iron will to ignore the conflicting desires trailing in his wake.

Her dog, the snarling beastie, followed him as well, nipping at his heels until he whirled around and gave the mite a ferocious look of his own.

The wee creature froze, his snapping jaws halted as surely as if Marmaduke had emptied a bucket of ice water on him. For a beat, the little dog peered up at him, stunned surprise in his round eyes before he tore off across the rushes, his short legs pumping faster than if a pack of rabid hell-hounds chased after him.

Soundly repelled by one fierce look.

A fearsome scowl from the ravaged face of a man once rumored to be amongst the most handsome of England's chivalry.

Marmaduke almost laughed and would have, did his accursed vanity not choose that moment to plunge cold shards of bitterness into his heart.

*...forget so soon
How you and I, the world away,
Once lay and watched the moon?*

THE SONG, its familiar words a poignant memorial to a long-past time, sliced into him with all the vengeance off a foe's arcing sword.

He spun around, his gaze searching the farthest end of the hall whence the haunting verse seemed to come. He spotted her at once, despite the darkness of the deep window embrasure where she sat, softly strumming her lute and singing – as she'd done so many nights during their too-brief marriage.

Arabella.

Her slim body wrapped in the furred bed-robe he'd gifted her with a mere sennight before her death, her glossy raven hair hanging free, his long-buried wife sang for him...

*Can you forget the day,
The day that we-? But I am a fool,
Alas, my love, that day is faded and gone.*

BLOOD PUMPING WILDLY through his veins, Marmaduke made straight for her, uncomfortably disturbed by the way his heart exchanged Arabella's free-flowing black tresses for a satiny skein of gleaming gold.

Even his ears betrayed him for they strained to catch softer, more honeyed notes than the throaty, smoky-sounding tones drifting from the shadowy corner.

Telling, too, his burning desire to see her look up and gaze at him from sapphire eyes. But the first eyes to meet his when he reached the little alcove were dark.

Dark and masculine.

"Have you nothing better to do than peer in at us?" James gave him a sour look, then scooted around on the window embrasure's cushioned seat, turning his back on Marmaduke to stare out on the

great sweep of the iron-gray sea.

On the facing windowseat, Lady Rhona set aside her lute. "Sir," she greeted Marmaduke, her smile as warm as James' rigid back was cold. "Did you come to ask of your injured knight? Sir Lachlan?"

"I did indeed, my lady." Marmaduke inclined his head, glad for a reason. The saints knew he was still too flummoxed by what could only have been a cruel trick of the light to come up with his own. "How is he? I haven't been able to find him in the hall."

"He's abovestairs," Lady Catherine's companion said, adjusting the thick plaid blanket tucked around her hips and thighs. "He rests comfortably in the late Lord Keith's solar. We squeezed a bit of sea lettuce juice into his wine to help him sleep. I will redress his wounds later."

"I thank you." Marmaduke nodded again, grateful indeed. "The rest will do him good."

"Have a care lest you coddle him." James twisted round to frown at Rhona. "He has but a flesh wound."

"Even so, there are times all men have need of extra attention." She leveled a look at him. "As there are times such pampering is misplaced, wouldn't you say?"

James held her gaze, tight-lipped. He didn't so much as glance at Marmaduke, not that he cared. His nape still prickled too coldly for him to pay heed to the charged undercurrents between Lady Rhona and Dunlaidir's heir.

More disturbing by far was the strange glimpse he'd had of long-ago days best forgotten.

Swallowing the bitterness rising in his throat, he studied Rhona, trying to discover what beyond Arabella's favorite love sonnet had summoned such painful echoes of another time.

An odd occurrence, for nothing about his new lady's friend resembled his late wife save the same dark coloring.

"'Tis good you've come to us, my lord," she said then, her high color and James' scowl hinting they'd been engaging in more than lute playing and songs before he'd disrupted them.

"My lady has long had need of a champion," she added, casting a quick glance at James. "I knew her sister's husband would send a daring man in mail and sword-belt. A warrior unafraid."

"By all the rogue saints!" James leapt to his feet. "Would you push a man to the edge of his patience? Bold, strapping man of steel!" he railed, snatching up the lute as if he meant to break it in two. "Must a man be hung with metal to win your favor?"

He shook the lute at her. "Fool that I am, I thought you meant to please me with your singing, your kis- ... damnation!" Tossing the lute onto the windowseat, he whirled away from her.

Lady Rhona stood, too, one hand snatching up the lute, the other extended to James, but he stormed off before she could touch him, his stride purposeful and strong.

Beautifully smooth.

And wholly without a limp.

Marmaduke glanced sharply at Rhona and the joyous smile spreading across her face warmed his heart.

His lady's friend was wise.

If her machinations to summon him hadn't proved it, her ploy just now had. Her boldness also proved where her heart lay, and Marmaduke's own sentimental soul smiled at the revelation.

James Keith would need a woman with backbone at his side when Marmaduke and his men returned to Balkenzie.

"Now you've seen the way of it." Rhona sank back onto the windowseat. With a breathy little sigh, she looked out at the sea, but she hadn't turned away fast enough for him to miss the glimmer of tears in her eyes.

"So I have," Marmaduke said gently, some of the darkness inside him ebbing. Indeed, for the first time since his arrival at Dunlaidir, a true shimmer of hope quickened inside him.

If he could convince Catherine that her stepson, and Dunlaidir, would be in sound hands after their departure, his chances of persuading her to accompany him should improve.

"I wanted you to know." Rhona touched a hand to the stone edge of the window, her gaze still on the water. "I do what I must – always."

"Lady, you possess greater insight than many men I know," he praised her, meaning every word. "Were you not a woman, I would knight you here and now. James is fortunate to have your devotion."

"He is not lame," she said, glancing at him. "His right leg was hurt when a horse kicked him, but I suspect he scarce remembers which leg took the blow. The injury is long healed."

She paused to tuck her hair behind an ear. "Regrettably, he is convinced otherwise. Perhaps you can persuade him to believe differently?"

"I shall try," Marmaduke promised, a plan already forming in his mind.

"You will succeed, my lord," Rhona predicted. "Both with James and my lady."

Marmaduke raised her hand and kissed it. "Fair lady, I shall hold you to your word."

"Then go and see you to it." She smiled at him, then turned back to the window, giving him leave to do just that.

Moving away, he scanned the dimly lit hall, looking for James. He

spotted him making for the great iron-studded door to the outer stairs.

And, once again, he walked with an exaggerated limp.

Marmaduke caught up to him just as he reached to open the door. "Have you a smithy?" he asked, closing his hand around the younger man's arm.

James stared at him as if he'd sprouted horns. "A smithy?"

"A blacksmith. A master ironworker."

"I am not a dullwit," James seethed, struggling to free his arm. "I know what a smithy is, and, nae, we do not have one. Not any longer."

"A shame." Marmaduke released him, but blocked the door by leaning his back against its thick oak panels. "But no bother. We shall make do on our own," he said, crossing his ankles, his tone deliberately light. "We can reward our efforts with a refreshing plunge in the cold waters of the sea."

"The sea?"

"Of course." Marmaduke smiled. "After we visit the forge."

"Say you?" James' brows lifted. "I am not an underling to be ordered about."

"To be sure." Marmaduke flicked an invisible speck of lint off his steel-clad arm, aware all eyes in the hall watched their exchange. "I said we, my friend. Never would I breach the laws of hospitality by issuing orders to my host."

Satisfied when a bit of the fire went out of the younger man's eyes, Marmaduke pushed away from the door. "A well-meant suggestion, perhaps, but not a command."

"Ah, well..." Visible tension running through him, James glanced toward the shadowy window embrasure where Lady Rhona still sat. "There is no point in visiting the forge. It holds nothing but rusting iron and dust-covered bellows. Our smith abandoned us months ago. As for bathing in the sea, I do not swim."

True alarm had glimmered in James' eyes just then, so Marmaduke focused on the task at hand. Securing the latrine chutes and bolstering the younger man's confidence.

"Four strong arms should compensate for one disloyal smithy," he said.

James tightened his lips for a moment. "I will take you to the forge, but do not expect assistance from me. As you saw this morn, I am not much good to anyone."

"You will only be of no use if you keep dallying about with your lady rather than aiding me." Marmaduke reached out and gripped James' arm, testing his brawn. "You have strength enough for what we must do."

"And what is that?"

Marmaduke smiled again. "Come with me and you shall see."



CATERINE WATCHED the two men's exchange from the high table, her amazement growing. Rather than protest when the Sassunach tested James' arm muscle, a faint flush crept onto her stepson's cheeks and he stood a bit straighter.

And he did so without losing his balance.

When they made for the hall's main entrance, she would've sworn she'd caught the hint of a smile on James' face as he snatched his cloak off a bench near the door.

Sir Marmaduke waited while James adjusted his mantle before he fetched and donned his own. Then he slung his arm around the younger man's shoulders as they exited the hall, her champion's stride powerful and self-assured, her stepson's less confident but not as hesitant as his usual limping gait.

Caterine's heart warmed.

Never had she thought to see James walk with a spring in his step again.

Slowly sipping her wine, she stared into the shadows of the arched entrance long after they'd closed the great oaken door behind them.

More and more, her sister's chosen champion was proving himself a man truly worthy of the title.

But even as her heart softened toward him, her mind wrestled with other concerns.

Grave ones of a most serious nature.

Such as when exactly she'd stopped referring to him as the Sassunach champion and started thinking of him as simply *her* champion.

Pondering the meaning of such a revelation, she leaned back in her chair, her brow pleated as she stared into the shadows they'd left behind them.



OTHER EYES WATCHED their departure as well.

Brooding, hate-filled eyes hidden by the gloom near the bottom of the castle's outer stairs.

The observer's brow arched with disdain when they passed.

Soon the English interloper would ride a swift and cold wind straight to the bowels of hell, hastened there by a well-aimed English arrow.

That irony curling the watcher's lips, the dark-cloaked figure

slipped deeper into the dank chill of the white mist still blanketing much of the bailey.

Chapter 13

“**T**is as I told you,” James said, a short while later. He peered into the dank interior of the long-deserted forge. “There is nothing of use here.”

“Shall we see?” Unperturbed, Marmaduke retrieved a wobbly three-legged stool from the shadows and used it to prop open the door. The once bustling workshop needed airing.

Dunlaidir’s forge wasn’t just neglected, it smelled.

Of damp charcoal and rusting iron, of sea brine and mold.

Worse things he didn’t care to identify.

A gust of brisk salt-laden air swept past him, blasting through the opened door to lift choking clouds of dust and ash of the hard-packed earthen floor.

“Enough. Let us go.” James wrinkled his nose, the flare of purpose he’d displayed in the hall rapidly fading. He crossed his arms. “I will not go in there.”

Marmaduke arched a brow. “You’d concede defeat before the battle is fought?”

“Only those battles too pointless to pursue,” James grumbled. “Like walking straight or me challenging two swords-”

“Two swordsmen?” Marmaduke voiced what he’d already guessed. “Why did you change your story? Why claim there was but one?”

James fisted his hands and turned away.

Marmaduke frowned, not fooled by the younger man’s silence. He heard James’ roiling frustration, louder and more penetrating than the screeching seabirds wheeling overhead.

“See here, my friend.” Going to him, Marmaduke clamped a hand on his shoulder. “Together, we can catch the cravens,” he said. “But only if you will trust me.”

The younger man’s brow creased, but when he gazed heavenward and blew out a long breath, Marmaduke knew he’d won this round. “Well?” he tried again, taking his hand from James’ shoulder. “Why did you lie?”

“Because when I spoke the truth, the others laughed and said I’d stretched the tale by insisting there were two when in truth I couldn’t bear admitting I’d been defeated by a single swordsman.”

“So you let them believe what they wanted so they’d leave you

be?"

James nodded.

"Perhaps that is as well. We shall allow them to think that is the truth a bit longer." Marmaduke glanced at the screaming gulls riding air currents high above the forge. "We know the way of it. That is enough for now."

"You believe me?"

"I do," Marmaduke said, resting his hand almost casually on his sword-hilt. "But the saints know I wish I didn't."

James frowned. "How can you believe me, yet urge silence about the second intruder?"

"If indeed he was one. The man may have been invited, or assisted on his way out," Marmaduke said, carefully picking his words. "Perhaps both."

"No one here would betray us." James shook his head. "I cannot believe it."

Marmaduke shrugged his mail-clad shoulders. "Several thorough searches were made, yet no trace of this elusive interloper could be found. Flesh and blood men do not vanish into thin air, my friend."

"You believe someone in my household aided his escape?"

"I would give you my oath on it," Marmaduke returned. "Therefore it is best not to let anyone save, perhaps, Lady Catherine, know we are aware of possible in-house treachery."

"God's bones." James stared at him, slack-jawed. "That's heinous."

"So it is." Marmaduke turned away, strode a few paces before the younger man could further question him.

He knew much of in-house scheming and its dangers.

He carried the mark of such betrayal on his face and tasted the bile of its memory in the cold bitterness rising to choke him.

With a broad sweep of his arm, he cast aside a swaying curtain of cobwebs and stepped into the chill damp of the forge. "We can speak of this later," he said, glancing over his shoulder at James. "For now, we need a few sound pieces of grating to seal the garderobe chute."

James blinked. "The latrine?"

"So I said."

"You speak as if such a task were simple." James hovered on the threshold.

"Naught in life is simple," Marmaduke said, halting beside a dirt-encrusted stone trough, once filled with cooling water, now demoted to a receptacle for all manner of refuse. "But each mastered challenge makes the living more worthwhile."

James took several hesitant steps into the forge, once more favoring his leg. "Think you?"

"Nay, I know so."

Bending, Marmaduke retrieved a grimy leather pouch off the floor near the long-cold smelting furnace. He upended the sack and shook it hard. When nothing but dust emerged, he leveled a hard look at his companion.

James Keith reminded him more of himself at a younger age than he cared to admit.

"Come here," he said, something fiercely elemental twisting inside him at the anger and doubt he knew plagued the Dunlaidir heir.

Potent enemies, both.

And capable of laming the young man in a far worse way than some long-ago horse kick.

Fending off his own demons, Marmaduke held out the leather pouch. "'Tis shadowy in here," he said. "You have two good eyes. I have but one. Our purpose is better served if you search the corners, while I gather what I can from the area near the door where the light is stronger."

"I-" James started, then snapped his mouth shut and came forward to snatch the pouch from Marmaduke's outstretched hand. "Grating material, you said?"

Marmaduke nodded. "That, and anything that may aid us in securing such a grate."

"Aye, well then." Mumbling to himself, James began moving about the forge, stuffing odd lengths of wire, once used to craft links for mail, and rust-caked tools, into the leather sack.

Near the entrance, Marmaduke held up a good-sized drawplate and pretended to examine its many holes of varying sizes. The large sheet of metal was ideal to seal off the cliffside latrine chute. In truth, though, he paid little heed to the absent smith's prized tool for making wire, preferring to study James out of the corner of his good eye.

Though still grumbling beneath his breath, he moved about easily enough, displaying only a trace of his usual awkward gait.

Just as Marmaduke had hoped.

Seeing the younger man too preoccupied to remember to limp, warmed Marmaduke's heart and encouraged his conviction that he'd been sent across Scotland for more reasons than simply lending his warring skills and his name to a lady in need.

At the thought of her, other parts of him began to warm as well, so he smoothed his fingers over the cold metal of the drawplate, testing its strength, and letting its chill staunch the flow of heated blood to his loins.

He quirked a half-smile at the irony.

What his most-times unflagging resolve couldn't achieve, keeping his baser urges at bay, the onerous task before him accomplished with ease.

The distasteful undertaking would steal the itch from any man's tarse. And if it didn't, he'd simply make good his vow to bathe in the sea.

Trouble was, he desired his new lady with more than a persistent pull in his groin. He wanted her with his entire being.

Body, heart, and soul.

And neither his iron will nor the shock of the North Sea's icy waters was a mighty enough elixir to douse a need that burned so deep.



LATER, in another corner of Dunlaidir, Catherine found herself still unnerved by the kiss her champion had placed on the inside of her wrist. Equally disturbing, the name Arabella kept echoing in her mind, pestering her as she climbed the winding turnpike stair to her tower bedchamber.

Iron-bracketed wall torches set at convenient intervals hissed and sputtered, their uneasy flickering mirroring her jangled nerves. At the landing, her little dog, Leo, abandoned her to streak down the shadow-cast passage, then hurl himself against her closed bedchamber door.

By the time she caught up with him, he stood with his forelegs propped against the door's oaken panels, his tail wagging furiously.

Rhona.

Catherine's companion had to be inside her room. No one else earned such an enthusiastic response from Leo. She braced herself, for she'd hoped to enjoy a few moments of solitude before looking in on Sir Lachlan. Then she squared her shoulders and opened the door.

Leo gave a yelp of joy and dashed inside.

Catherine gasped.

Her friend was in the room, but rather than Rhona's pretty face, it was her companion's well-rounded bottom that greeted her.

Bent near double, Rhona had opened the iron-bound strongbox at the base of Catherine's curtained bed and appeared to be rummaging through its contents.

"Rhona." Catherine closed the short distance between them. "What are you doing?"

Rhona straightened and whirled about, almost tripping over Leo, who ran in gleeful circles around her, barking his excitement. "Mercy, but you startled me." Her eyes wide, she stared at Catherine, a large wooden bowl clutched in her hands.

A wooden bowl with a round, cloth-covered lump inside it.

The Laird's Stone.

A near perfectly round stone of dark gray granite speckled with crystal quartz.

A magical stone said to weep, its tears filling the bowl, each time a master of Dunlaidir died, then again, this time for joy, when a new laird took his place.

Or so the legend claimed.

Caterine had never seen it happen.

"What are you doing with that?" she prompted when Rhona continued to stare at her, gog-eyed and blushing.

She reached for the bowl, but Rhona cradled it protectively against her middle. "I wanted to see if the stone had wept for James yet," she said, back-stepping toward the bank of arch-topped windows behind her.

"Come, Rhona. You know it's just a stone. The legend is nonsense." Caterine struggled against a frown. "Foolery spun by some long-dead storyteller to fill cold and dark winter nights."

"I saw it shed tears when Laird Keith passed." Rhona set the cloth-covered bowl on the cushioned seat of the window embrasure and folded her arms. "You saw the water in the bowl. Everyone did."

"Aye, after you fetched the silly stone," Caterine reminded her. "Perhaps you poured water over it."

"You think I would stoop to such trickery?"

"Who do we have to thank that an English champion now dwells within these walls? A Sassunach I am soon to wed, in large part because of your trickery."

Rhona's brow knit. "I thought you were coming to favor him?"

"He is English." Caterine glanced away before her friend read too much into the heat blooming on her cheeks. Emotions did whirl inside her, so she fixed her gaze on the familiar expanse of sea and sky beyond the tall windows.

The well-cherished view calmed her as soundly as the cold salt air streaming through the opened windows cooled her burning cheeks.

"Your champion is a gallant, my lady," Rhona persisted. "So tall and strong, his muscles—"

"His muscles do not interest me."

"I do not believe you." Rhona tsked. "You must like him, even the teeniest bit?"

"Whether I like him or not, the Laird's Stone and its legend has no more credence than any other bard's tale," Caterine said, her gaze on the wind-whipped sea. "Sir Marmaduke is and shall remain an Englishman."

And I am not woman enough to follow the yearnings of my heart. The ghosts of too many other Englishmen stand in the way.

Squaring her shoulders, Caterine turned back to her friend.

“Tradition, fanciful or nae, deems a laird’s worthiness must be recognized by the stone before it will weep.” She locked her gaze on Rhona’s. “Even if the legend were true, do you really think the stone would welcome James as new lord with *him* beneath our roof?”

She waved a silencing hand when Rhona started to protest. “I do not believe such folly, but you do. So how can you expect the stone to honor James as Dunlaidir’s new master when one so brave and bold-”

“So you are falling under his spell.”

“Most assuredly not. I just see...” Catherine trailed off when Rhona’s mouth crooked in a knowing smile.

“You *do* favor him.”

“He intrigues me,” Catherine admitted, not willing to say more. Taking the younger woman by the elbow, she escorted her across the rush-strewn floor and out of the chamber. Only when she closed and barred the door behind her, did she release the breath she’d been holding.

Across the room, the wooden bowl and its cloth-covered contents beckoned. But at the moment, she’d rather plunge her hand into a pit of hissing adders than peek beneath the harmless-looking cloth.

Should, after all these years, the Laird’s Stone choose this moment to perform for her, its tears heralding Sir Marmaduke Strongbow as Dunlaidir’s new master might prove more of a shock than she could shoulder.

Rhona knew her well.

She favored him indeed.

And that knowledge disturbed her almost as much as her reasons for not wanting to.

“B_y rope?”

James stared at the sturdy length of knotted rope disappearing over Dunlaidir’s seaward wall. “A horde of flaming firedrakes wouldn’t send me down that cliff on a rope. The drop is sheer with nary a ledge to rest upon.”

Sir Ross stopped tying knots in a second rope and tossed him an amused glance. “Dinnae tell me you’d prefer the latrine chute?”

The other men chuckled. Even the most-times dour Sir John joined in their mirth. “It would be a fast ride down,” he agreed, peering over the wall. “That’s certain.”

James remained silent, his mouth pressed into a tight-lipped line.

“Aye, a swift descent, if a bit smelly,” another of the MacKenzie men, Sir Alec, blustered. A quip that brought broader smiles to all but James.

“Enough.” Marmaduke swept them with a comradely but warning glance.

“No ill will meant, young sire.” Alec gave James a friendly thwack on the arm. “Our blood yet runs high from this morn, is all.”

“And the day is not yet spent. Jestin’ will not see the latrine chute sealed.” Marmaduke glanced at the line of dark clouds crouching low on the horizon before turning to Ross. “Have you finished with the second rope?”

“Aye.” The Highlander yanked hard on the rope. “It bears enough knots for its purpose and is strong enough to support an ox.”

Marmaduke tossed a glance through one of the wall’s notched openings at the jagged rocks, below. Chill sea wind whipped his hair and whistled past his ears, but he welcomed its salt-laden bite.

The intruders’ round-hulled coracle still bobbed atop the swells and great plumes of sea spray shot high up the cliff. Of his assailant’s corpse, was nary a trace. Only the tiny boat, the roar of the surf, and the dangling rope.

Turning away from the wall, he unbuckled his sword belt and handed it to Sir John. The fourth MacKenzie warrior, Sir Gowan, helped him shrug out of his mailed shirt. Once free of his undertunic

as well, he slanted a sidelong glance at James.

The young lord peered over the wall. "You do not expect me to go down the other rope?" A dull red flush began inching up his neck. "I cannot swim."

"No one is asking you to," Marmaduke assured him, stretching his arms over his head and flexing his fingers. "The second rope is to lower the satchel and drawplate. I will use the first rope to climb down the cliff. You and Ross need only hold the ropes."

"Him hold one of the ropes? Best say your prayers if it's yours." The gruff voice came from the back of the group of men gathered near and was quickly followed by a round of chuckles.

The Keith men.

"...taking your life in your hands, Strongbow, or rather, leaving it in his hands," another called out, his booming voice echoing off the thick stone of the seawall.

Ignoring the men, Marmaduke knelt on the stone-flagged floor of the battlements and busied himself securing the satchel and drawplate to the knot-free end of the second rope.

"Have a care holding this," he said to Ross, then tossed the rope and its weighty cargo over the wall. "I do not want to do this twice."

Saints, his innards twisted at the thought.

They clenched even more at the possibility James Keith might not have the strength and stamina to support his weight.

Even so, he'd take his chances.

The looks on the faces of Dunlaidir's household knights left him little choice.

Thus committed, he returned to where the first rope disappeared over the edge of the same crenel opening his assailant had fallen through earlier.

The man's death scream echoed in his ears the instant his fingers closed around the knotted rope.

"Do not disappoint me," he said, thrusting the end of the rope into James' hands. "I am not yet ready to leave this world."

James nodded once. "I'll hold it fast."

Marmaduke returned the nod, and then, before his doubts about James' capabilities could stop him, he swung himself over the wall. Fierce gusts of sea wind seized him at once, repeated blasts of brine-laden air that bit into his bare back and whipped his hair across his face, making the perilous descent even more difficult.

He kept his gaze on the vertical rock face in front of him. Glistening wet and dark, the very stone reeked of the sea and a fouler, more rank odor that could only have to do with the purpose of his descent.

As he neared the bottom, great plumes of icy foam fanned upward,

enclosing him in a shimmering, luminescent cloud that misted his skin and lent cooling relief to his straining arm and thigh muscles.

At last he reached the rocks at the cliff's base, but a thick coating of darkish slime and slippery clumps of long-tendrilled seagrass made it difficult to stand.

Frigid waves slammed into the backs of his knees, posing a further test to his balancing skills. The satchel and drawplate rested nearby and the garderobe chute loomed not five feet above the rocks, protected from the sea's endless lashing by a cave-like niche carved deep into the face of the cliff.

Securely tied to one of the larger rocks, the coracle rose and fell with the sea. Eager to be done, Marmaduke thrust his dirk into the hide-covered hull. He made several long gashes, then cut the tethers, freeing the little boat to the tide.

Straightening, he picked his way over the rocks to the cliff-face. Someone long before him had cut deep into the rock, widening what must've been a natural fissure. An alcove of sorts, shielded from the most vicious lashings of the wind and waves, but filled with heavy, stagnant air.

Long-corroded shards of twisted iron protruded from the opening's edges, bearing testament that a grate of some sorts had once guarded this foul-reeking route out of, or into, the bowels of Dunlaidir.

Literally.

Marmaduke shuddered, tried not to inhale too deeply.

Revulsion lent speed to his handiwork. As did a keen awareness of the need to be done before the heavens cracked open.

Blessedly, the drawplate proved a perfect fit.

No further murder-minded miscreants would use the chute to sneak into the stronghold.

Even so, he wouldn't sleep easily until he knew his lady safely on the other side of Scotland, happily ensconced in his own soon-to-be claimed, better guarded, and much more comfortable Balkenzie.

But closer than Balkenzie and, at the moment, of greater importance, the storm that had appeared so far out to sea neared at an alarming pace. The air around him crackled, prickling his skin and lifting the hair on his arms.

Arms no longer slick with mere sweat and salt spray, but streaked with grime.

His hands were worse.

Marmaduke glanced at the tossing waves. Cold and wild, there was no question they'd be invigorating as well as cleansing.

And he had promised himself a dip in the sea.

Above him, James leaned through one of the crenel openings, watching him. He was clearly waiting to see if Marmaduke would

indeed go into the water.

Marmaduke didn't need to consider.

He'd lose already-gained ground with James should he not follow through with his boast. And so he lifted a hand in acknowledgment and flashed his best smile.

Then, before his good sense prevailed, he dived off the narrow ledge of rocks.

The icy water embraced him, its shock nearly stopping his heart. A strong undertow threatened to whisk him out to sea, but before the current could pull him deeper, another more powerful cross-current caught him in the side, rolling him over and over before slinging him against a wall of submerged rock.

His head and shoulders broke the surface close enough to the base of the cliff for him to grab hold of one of the rocks and swing himself over its edge to safety.

His lungs screamed for air, his entire right side burned as if on fire, and the sting of saltwater near stole the vision from his good eye, but he'd kept his word.

For a long moment, he didn't move and simply let the water course down his limbs. He took several deep, restorative gulps of air, filling his lungs before he squeezed the water from his hair, then ran both hands down his face.

Clean hands.

Clean arms.

A body freed of every last speck of foul matter, his manhood so thoroughly chilled even the tempting image of his lady unclothed and willing wasn't potent enough to stir him.

For the moment.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a wry smile. It was time to face another challenge. One requiring a greater act of faith than diving into the sea.

He was about to discover if James Keith was man enough to help him scale the cliff.

And to rule as Dunlaidir's master once he and his lady were gone.

Chapter 15

A brace of candles, tall ones of purest beeswax, and a bronze oil lamp suspended from the ceiling on a chain, illuminated the late Laird Niall Keith's private solar. Catherine sat on a stool next to the chamber's curtained bed, scarcely breathing, and trying hard to quell the disquieting sensation that someone, *something*, watched her from the shadows.

Shifting pools of blue-black filled the corners, well beyond reach of the wavering candle glow and the cresset lamp's low-burning flame.

Dark and eerie, of a certainty, but not a trysting place for spirits. That she knew.

So she sat up straighter and drew a deep, backbone-steeling breath. She also unclenched her hands, aware that her edginess was as foolhardy as Rhona believing in stones that cried.

The room held nothing more daunting than dust and stale air.

Originally intended as a true solar, her late husband had preferred to sleep within its mural-painted walls, leaving her to her own quarters, a much more welcoming room, if colder with its windows opening directly onto the sea.

The haven of her bedchamber called to her now, but she tamped down the urge to return there and, instead, reached down to stroke Leo's back. The little dog lay curled atop her feet, his warm weight a comfort in the oppressive silence.

A heavy quiet broken only by the patter of rain on the windows and Sir Lachlan's occasional snores. The injured Highlander slept in the freshly dressed bed, lulled to a deep slumber by the potency of Catherine's specially prepared painkilling elixir.

Once, he'd opened bleary eyes and looked at her, mumbling a few unintelligible words before falling swiftly back to sleep. If the saints smiled on her, he'd awaken again. His company would be a glad respite from the uneasy memories welling inside her since crossing the solar's threshold.

Reaching out, she smoothed the bedcovers for the wounded knight. His steady breathing and lack of fever promised a good recovery, and little else mattered.

Least of all Niall's ghost peering at her from the shadow-cast corners.

His unblinking stare reminding her that she'd never been able to rouse him.

Caterine's brow knitted.

Niall hadn't been an ogre. He'd not even sought her affections after the first year of their marriage. And not once had he chided her for her inability to properly stir him.

He'd understood how her initiation into womanhood had robbed her of all desire to explore her femininity.

Patient even in those first twelve months, her late husband often let her withdraw to the sanctum of her own quarters, tactfully claiming her next visit to his bed would prove fruitful.

But they never had and he'd eventually stopped sending for her.

And now, with a new marriage looming on the horizon, the very walls of Niall's old solar seemed steeped with his presence.

As if he knew.

Caterine shivered, rubbed her arms against the cold. An iciness that didn't seem to bother Sir Lachlan at all.

Disquieted, she shifted on the tapestry-covered stool. She'd brought it from her own chamber, not wishing to sit in the cumbersome chair of richly carved oak Niall had reclined in to watch her disrobe during those early attempts at what he referred to as conjugal pleasure.

Determined to vanquish him, Caterine scooped Leo onto her lap, snuggling him close against her, her gaze on the three arch-topped windows set into the opposite wall.

Unlike her own chamber, the solar boasted windows of glass. Small, round panes set in lead and of an indiscernible opaque color. Hard to see through, but a luxury all the same.

As were the thickly strewn furred skins covering the cold stone floor. An extravagance Niall had allowed himself, and one that kept the room much warmer than hers.

So why couldn't she banish the chillbumps?

Even the hearth's low-burning peat fire failed to warm her.

Fighting the urge to chatter her teeth, she glanced at the Highlander. He'd rolled onto his side and flung one well-muscled arm over his face. But still, he slept.

Relieved, she turned back to the windows. Gloaming neared and the light, what little there was on such a storm-swept afternoon, had changed, lending a rare, luminescent quality to the milky window glass.

The skin on her nape prickled, for the color of the panes came very close to the pale gray of her late husband's eyes.

Eyes that peered at her from the rain-streaked glass.

Hundreds of pairs of Niall's eyes.

Caterine's heart slammed against her ribs and a cry rose in her throat, lodging there when the image shifted and the silver rivulets of rain became tears, the hundreds of staring eyes, her own.

A loud crack of thunder shook the room, rattling the fragile glass panes and sending Leo bolting from her lap to seek refuge under the great four-poster bed.

The thunder's still-echoing rumbles banished the disturbing image as well.

Once again, the three tall windows appeared as they always had, with nothing but a fine layer of dust and a sad build-up of grime to distinguish them.

A great shudder ripped through her, streaking clear to her toes. Amazingly, the young Highlander slept on, blissfully unaware of the storm raging outside, blessedly ignorant of the one warring within Caterine's own breast.

Only Leo sensed her ill-ease. He peered at her from beneath the bed, his round eyes quizzical and tinged with sympathy she didn't want. Not even from dear sweet Leo.

She alone crafted her nightmares, and she alone would besiege them.

Chapter 16

Determined to conquer her demons, Catherine ignored the storm raging outside her late husband's solar and twisted around on her stool to stare hard at Niall's oaken great chair. If anything in the chamber wished to haunt her, it would be his throne-like chair.

But the empty chair stood mute.

Harmless.

A hulking mass of dark wood in the farthest corner, well-hidden by shadow.

No image of an aging husband reclined in the chair, his gaze anxious and hopeful, manifested to torment her.

Her pulse slowing somewhat, she started to turn away, but the cresset lamp's flickering light flared bright before she could. She stared, spellbound, as the lamp's soft glow spread into the murky corner to mesh with the echoes of days and nights long past, and sprang to life in the massive oak chair.

But it was not Niall's sprawled form her imagination conjured.

It was *his*.

Her champion's.

And wearing his fur-lined great cloak with nothing beneath!

He'd flung one powerfully muscled leg over the side of the chair and held a magnificently jeweled chalice to his lips. His cloak gaped slightly, its heavy folds draped open just enough to give a glimpse of his hard-trained body in all its masculine glory.

For it was the glory part of him the parted mantle revealed.

Fine, manly splendor fully aroused. And every bit as imposing as his jesting men had implied.

Catherine gulped, her heart thudding.

Looking more real, more full-bodied and whole, than a dream image ought do, the Sassunach took a slow sip of wine, then lifted his chalice in silent toast to someone she couldn't see. His expression held a wealth of some emotion she couldn't define for she'd never seen such a look on a man's face.

A look her heart recognized even if she didn't.

It was the manifestation of infinite adoration.

Of love, shining, pure, and true.

Something she'd doubted existed and might be tempted to believe was possible, were she looking at a flesh and blood man and not peering deep into the darkest corners of her own soul.

There, where her hidden desires resided.



CATERINE SAT FROZEN on her stool in her late husband's chamber, her gaze locked on the magnificent *vision-man* before her. She didn't know what was more astonishing, that she'd somehow conjured Niall in the window glass, then her own tear-filled eyes, and now this image of the English knight, or that some never-before-awakened part of her recognized the stirrings inside her for what they apparently were...

Feminine need.

"Mercy me." She pressed a hand to her breast, felt the trembling of her fingers.

Yearning consumed her, a need so intense she ached with wanting. Her throat tightened even while the rest of her seemed to soften and grow warm.

But then another great peal of thunder and a silvery flash of lightning shattered the image. As if the raging elements meant to mock her, the storm seemed to hold its breath, going so silent she could almost hear the rushing of her own blood.

That, and a low rumbling too near to be lingering echoes of thunder.

No, not rumbles...

She heard growls.

And by the time the realization dawned, Leo's snarls erupted in a series of sharp little dog barks. Hackles raised, he burst from beneath the bed to charge the door, reaching it just as it swung open to reveal *him*.

Her champion.

In a flash of golden-brown fur, his jaws snapping, Leo pounced on Sir Marmaduke's ankles. His shrill barks reached an ear-splitting level only to stop abruptly when the tall English knight turned a stern look on him.

With a yelp, Leo streaked back beneath the massive bed. Still shaken, Catherine would've cried out and run for cover, too, but her legs proved too leaden to move and her throat seemed stuffed with wool.

Could the man possibly know what foolery her mind had summoned? Worse, the way her body responded?

Dear heavens, she hoped not.

Blessedly, Lachlan gave a low moan then and tossed on the bed, the distraction allowing her time to gather her wits.

She cleared her throat, still not trusting her knees to hold her should she stand. "What are you doing here?" she asked the champion. "I didn't expect you."

"In this chamber or beneath your roof?"

Neither, she almost blurted, feeling like a trapped deer.

"You needn't look so stricken." He entered the room with confident strides, his broad-shouldered presence overwhelming in the close confines of the solar.

Caterine swallowed, her heart skittering.

Candle shine glinted off the thick mane of his dark hair and spilled across the hard-muscled expanse of his tunic-clad chest. But the flickering light didn't illuminate his face, and with his features half obscured by shadow, traces of the handsome man he'd once been were hauntingly apparent.

"I am not stricken." Caterine pushed to her feet, amazed her legs supported her. Faith, but her knees trembled. Nae, they knocked. "I..." she trailed off, a heated blush flaming her cheeks.

"I know what you meant. And you needn't ever fear me." Placing his hands on her shoulders, he cast a glance into the dark recess of the curtained bed. "I came to see how Lachlan fares. I'd heard he rests comfortably, but wanted to see for myself."

"Oh." Caterine blinked.

Never had she felt more a fool.

Of course, he'd come to look in on his man.

Then she caught the twinkle of humor in his good eye. Her pulse quickened anew, something shamefully like hope spilling through her, exciting her.

As if he knew, he stepped closer and raised her hand to his lips. "And I came to see you," he said, releasing her.

She blinked. "You did?"

"Indeed." His voice held a soothing calm. "I would know you safe, my lady."

"And I thank you," she said, the warmth in his gaze sending a cascade of pleasurable sensation through her.

Hoping he couldn't tell, she gestured to a nearby tray of buttered bannocks and roasted sea-tangle, the stalks of which made a fine savory dish. "My stepson brought refreshment earlier. Humble but filling fare, and tastier than it looks."

"That I know," he said, surprising her. "Duncan's great-great-grandfather was especially fond of seaweed. The household keeps up the tradition, serving it now and then." Smiling, he tried a portion, then nodded. "'Tis good."

"We have it often. Likely more so than it appears on my sister's table." She stood straighter, brushed at her skirts. "James said you shall be with us but a short while."

"Did he also say where he heard that?"

"From your men, I believe. The MacKenzie warriors."

He frowned. "It would seem young James needs instruction in stringing words together as sorely as he needs to practice swinging a sword."

"He erred?" She blinked, relief sweeping her. "You are not planning to leave?"

He looked past her to the bed. His man still slept. "I will not lie to you," he said after moment, and folded his arms. "Your stepson spoke the truth, thought I suspect he did so rather clumsily."

Caterine's relief spun away, as short-lived as the sparks that shot up now and then from the smoldering peat fire. Her plans, Dunlaidir's safe-being, *everything*, whirled around her and crashed at her feet, bursting into a thousand fractured pieces.

He meant to leave.

To give her his name, then depart.

A name alone wouldn't protect her from Hugh de la Hogue, not without the man and the sword arm attached to it.

"You agreed to champion me, to lend us your warring skills," she finally said, her pride thick on her tongue.

"So I did," he admitted. "To lend them to this stronghold."

Caterine swallowed, a sinking suspicion wrapping around her, its weight bearing down on her shoulders like a too-heavy cloak. "I see," she said, glancing at the windows. Blackness now pressed against them, the flickering candles reflected off the glass panes. "Your skills and those of your men are but on loan."

Marmaduke bit back an oath as dark as the young night descending outside the tall windows. "That is a rather bald way to put it, my lady," he said, resisting the wish to throttle her stepson.

She looked back at him, her deep blue eyes bright in the mellow lighting. "Then how would you describe it?"

"Not as James did, to be sure." Marmaduke glanced at the door he'd purposely left ajar. He searched for words, for once at a loss. His much-acclaimed silver tongue failed him, stilled by the top swells of his lady's breasts peeking at him above her gown's low-cut neckline.

The *arisaid* she'd draped around her shoulders had slipped, revealing just enough creamy flesh to challenge urges he'd rather keep in check. For now, some dark, impatient part of his soul reminded him.

"See here, lady..."

"I see very well." She drew a deep breath, causing her breasts to

rise. "You and your men will soon depart."

More distracted than he cared to be, Marmaduke captured her chin with his thumb and forefinger. "Lending you our strength does not mean we shall leave on the morrow. I rode across Scotland to champion you and am well aware of the viciousness of your foe, as are my men. Be assured we shall not depart until this stronghold can stand secure on its own. That I swear to you."

"You have my gratitude." She looked down though, and began nudging her toe against the edge of one of the furred skins on the floor. "The thanks of us all."

"Such aid is given gladly, my lady," Marmaduke said, bothered by her toe-nudging. It reminded him of the way her sister had scuffed her toe against the stone chapel floor at Eilean Creag the morning she'd sought him out with her absurd plea.

Toe scuffing was something Lady Linnet did when something truly plagued her.

Something important.

A habit that always went straight to his heart.

And so he released Catherine's chin and clasped his hands behind his back. "What troubles you, fair lady?"

The toe-nudging ceased.

She looked up at him, sober-faced. "I am not worried for myself." She paused, cleared her throat. "You came here aware of our plight, yet you see them resolved by giving me your name and then abandoning us to remain as unprotected as before?"

"That is not the way of it. Did you not hear me promise this holding shall have sufficient strength to stand against any threat before we go?" He held her gaze. "I do not break my word."

She appeared to consider, the slight crease between her brows making her look anything but convinced. "James cannot lead and the remaining men in our garrison are too few. Many of our tenants have fled and those remaining are dispirited. They are weary from having to scratch out a living without our support."

Turning away, she pulled the woolen *arisaid* back up around her shoulders. "We do not have stores enough to adequately feed those within our walls, much less the villagers who've depended on us in the past."

"I am glad you told me this," Marmaduke said, relieved. Such cares could be easily remedied. He'd faced greater challenges over the years, and mastered each one.

Mastered most, his demons amended.

Ignoring them, he gently turned her to face him.

"Those problems will be dealt with," he assured her, letting his hands rest lightly on her shoulders. "Every last one of them. As I've

vowed to give you the protection of my name, I give you my solemn oath on—”

“If you can accomplish such feats,” she cut in, a slight waver in her voice, “then my bearing your name seems of little consequence.”

She paused to reach down and stroke her little dog. The wee beastie had crept from his hiding place and now pressed himself against her legs. “Your name alone will not aid me,” she said, straightening. “Most especially after you’re gone.”

“You misunderstood,” Marmaduke said, aware of the dog’s unblinking stare. “What you presume was never my intent.”

“Nae?”

Marmaduke shook his head. “May the saints strike me down were it so.”

“But you admit you mean to leave. James mentioned as soon as Yuletide—” He silenced her by placed the tips of two fingers ever-so-lightly against her temptingly soft lips.

“My intent was and remains the exact opposite of what you believe,” he said, giving her his special smile.

One he’d practiced carefully in recent years.

The smile that brought out his dimples.

“James heard correctly,” he said, touching her cheek. “I do wish to be home by Yule, but with you at my side. And not simply as the woman bearing my name but as my own true bride.”

“Your true bride?”

“Of a certainty,” he said, and her heartbeat quickened. “In every sense of the word.”



“...HAVE done with him in every way I can think of,” one of Dunlaidir’s household knights snarled about the same time in the great hall. “The debased varlet doesn’t deserve to live,” he added, hammering the blunt end of his eating knife on the table in time with each angry word.

“Let him dangle till the wind whistles through his bones is what we should do!” someone shouted from a nearby long table, his fury almost palpable in the smoke-hazed air.

“Hanging’s too good for de la Hogue,” a third man vowed, winning loud agreement from the others.

Though bone-chilling damp pervaded the hall’s vastness, strong spirits and stronger words heated the blood of the men gathered at the bench-lined tables.

At the end of the one nearest the arched entry to the turnpike stairs, an aged black-frosted priest, Father Tomas, kept his calm,

appearing more intent on smearing mashed sea-tangle on a buttered bannock half than paying heed to all the grumbles and curses.

His buttering efforts completed, he turned to the man at his right, the MacKenzie Highlander, Sir Gowan. "God be praised you are here," he said. "With your help, perhaps Sir Hugh's reign of terror will soon end. He has caused much damage."

"Hah!" Farther down the table, Sir John snorted and wagged a finger at the old priest. "That dastard won't be easily suppressed. He hasn't earned his black reputation for naught. He glories in ruination and has enough metal-clad henchmen to see us all in our graves."

"All the more reason we must be grateful to have the MacKenzie men at our sides," Father Tomas said, turning his attention back to his bannocks.

An awkward silence fell, stretching uncomfortably until Sir Ross half-rose off the bench, his ale mug held high. "A toast!" his deep voice boomed. "To ridding this land of Sir Hugh and his ilk, and to Strongbow and his new lady."

Cheers rang out, voices rising and falling with toasts of their own, all accompanied by the pounding of fists on the long tables and the echoing thunder of stamping feet.

"By God's good graces, may this union be more propitious for him than the last!" Gowan shouted, waving his ale cup in the air.

"Sir Priest!" another voice rose above the ruckus. "When shall the happy twain be joined?"

The din wound down as all gazes sought the aged holy man. "In a sennight," Father Tomas answered around a bite of bannock. "Seven days."

The furor erupted anew with well-meant whoops, and a few bawdy jests.

But then the mood swung angry again...

"...let the crabs clean his bones!"

"...headsman with a blunt ax!"

"...his quarters suspended in chains!"

And when the shouting reached a fever pitch, all brows dark with scorn and tempers high, a lone figure rose and quit the hall.

At the door to the outer stairs, he turned to survey the chaos behind him. Then he smiled.

Thanks to the ranting poltroons and their babble, he finally had news to share.

Good, *valuable* news.

Feeling much pleased, he swirled his cloak about his shoulders and stepped out into the cold, wet night.

Chapter 17

His bride.

In every sense of the word.

Tight bands of heat snaked around Catherine's chest even as excitement stirred to life deep inside her.

"I cannot go with you," she blurted, avoiding the most unsettling part of the Sassunach's declaration. His comment about wanting her as a true bride.

Merciful heavens.

Her senses spinning, she grappled for excuses. "I am needed here. Dunlaidir is..."

Something about the way he looked at her made her trail off. As if he'd cast some sorcerer's spell over her, she stood silent as he lifted his hand to her face.

Holding her gaze, he smoothed his thumb along the edge of her jaw. "This stronghold is in sore need of a masterful hand," he finished for her, his deep voice flowing into and over her. Smooth, warm, and so compelling. "James could hold it well if you would allow him to cease hiding behind your skirts."

"James-" She broke off when he slid his thumb oh-so-lightly over her lower lip and her objections evaporated, pushed aside by a sigh.

A great heaving one she could no sooner deny than the rapid thundering of her heart.

"Your stepson is not the only reason I wish you to leave with me." He looked deep into her eyes, effortlessly holding her gaze. "Think you I am without needs, my lady? Do you truly believe I could wed you and not want to make you mine?"

"Ehh..." Catherine swallowed. "Such an arrangement was never intended," she said, disturbingly tantalized by the intimacy of standing so close to him, startled by the way his mere words seemed to embrace her.

A spell-caster, indeed, his nearness enfolded her in a charmed circle of burgeoning desire bold enough to make her half believe his touch might erase the darkness in her heart.

Challenge her worst fears, and win.

Watching her closely, he rubbed his chin and the candle glow caught on his signet ring's cabochon ruby. The large gemstone flashed red fire at her, recalling the jeweled chalice he'd lifted in toast in her conjured image of him in Niall's chair.

Heat shot up her neck.

She forced herself to hold his gaze, tried her best to ignore the winking ruby. "A true marriage was no one's purpose in scheming to get you here."

He arched a brow. "Think you?"

Caterine nodded.

"Sometimes others know us better than we know ourselves, my lady."

"Linnet and her husband know me well enough not to have pledged me to an Englishman."

"Interesting." He slid his knuckles ever-so-gently down her cheek. "Twas they who suggested I make you my bride."

Caterine gasped. "Then you have charmed my sister."

"Nay, the good lady charmed me," he said. "Had I known one of her sisters would hold such appeal for me, I swear to you, I would have come to win your heart years ago."

"As you won Arabella's?" The question sprang off her tongue before she realized she'd formed the words.

Embarrassed, she tried to glance away, but he crooked his fingers beneath her chin, his firm grip leaving her little choice but to meet his gaze.

His face had gone a shade paler, and the line of his jaw appeared to have hardened a bit, but his expression didn't bear any of the anger she'd expected.

"Lady, I would indeed like to woo you as I did Arabella," he said, his voice a notch deeper than usual. "I'd also enjoy speaking to you of your sister, to tell you why I revere her."

He glanced at the door. It still stood ajar. "But first, I would have private words with you."

"Private words?" she echoed, her senses still careening with the intensity of his nearness, the name Arabella spinning a tight little knot somewhere beneath her ribs.

"Perhaps I should say words spoken in private." He strode to the door, clearly confident she'd follow him.

And she did, of course.

How could she not when something deep inside warned that anything else would haunt her forever.

MARMADUKE WAITED AT THE DOOR, much relieved when Lady Caterine joined him.

Closing his ears to the whispers breathed to life by her mention of Arabella, he stepped into the torchlit passageway, glad to shut the solar door on memories of summers gone and bliss-filled nights long past.

His new lady's scent swirled around him, its crisp, clean lightness chasing away the dark of another, years-faded fragrance, and sweeping through him with all the wonder of a bright new day.

A new life, he hoped.

"Arabella..." She peered at him, questions filling her sapphire eyes, the smooth cream of her cheeks touched with just a hint of rose. "Will you tell me about her?" she asked, the words scarce audible above the wind whistling past the corridor's shuttered windows. "Who was she?"

Marmaduke nodded, too thick-throated to speak, the iron bands around his heart both tightening their grasp and snapping free.

Tugged in two directions.

One beautiful and dark, but now cold as the sea battering Dunlaidir's cliffs; the other equally lovely but awash with all the golden light and warmth of a sunburst.

Vibrantly alive, and calling to him louder than the fast-fading echoes of another time.

Another woman's love.

"Aye, I will tell you of her," he forced the words, "but not in this corridor."

"Then where?" She tilted her golden head to the side and her *arisaid* parted just enough to tempt him with another sweet glimpse at the top swells of her breasts, luscious enough to rub the silver clean off his tongue.

"Have you a squint?" he heard himself ask, the fool-sounding question tumbling from his lips before he could better form his concerns.

"A squint?"

"A laird's lug," he clarified, using the more familiar Highland term. "A secret place where we can speak without prying eyes and straining ears."

A safe trysting place where I might unburden my soul and where the dimness will flatter my ravaged face.

And keep my ghosts at bay.

"There is one," she answered after a moment's hesitation. "It's built into the wall by the minstrels' gallery and reached by a hidden stairwell."

"Then let us go there." He made to turn, but she stayed him with a surprisingly firm grip to his arm.

"I do not think that is wise," she said.

"Indeed?" Marmaduke leaned one shoulder against the wall and crossed his ankles and arms.

Then he waited.

"Times are perilous, it is true," she went on, lowering her hand. "But I do not see the need to seek out a hidden cranny to speak."

"I would go there all the same," Marmaduke said, pushing away from the wall.

She frowned.

The toe of her slipper edged from beneath her skirts to nudge at the stone flagging of the passage floor.

Marmaduke re-folded his arms.

"The door to the hidden passage is in my bedchamber's ante-room," she said, at last revealing her true reason for not wanting to take him there.

"That scarce matters, my lady," he said, trying to keep the corners of his mouth from turning up at the advantage her revelation gave him.

Most especially since, as of this night, he intended to sleep in that ante-room.

And in a sennight, nearer still.

"But—"

Marmaduke shook his head, his steely resolve cutting off her protest as soundly as if he'd snatched the words from her lips.

"Come," he said, then paused a moment as wind rattled the shutters. "Be assured I would not seek the cramped confines of a squint to speak with you did I not believe such a precaution to be necessary."

Placing his trust in his ability to win her confidence, he overlooked the doubt in her eyes, an unflattering hesitancy he preferred to ignore, and held out his hand.

"Come," he repeated.

Slowly, she took two steps forward, then slipped her hand into his. A powerful emotion curled round his heart at the feel of her slender fingers lacing with his own, and his senses snapped to sharp-edged awareness.

"Ach, here is a wonder!" Lady Rhona's cheery voice scattered his dust-coated dreams.

His lady's companion drew up before them, a basket of dried sphagnum moss clutched under one arm, and an earthen bowl of some sharp-smelling unguent in her free hand.

"My faith!" She gave them a look of contrived astonishment. "Is it not a mite cold and draughty to be standing about, here in the middle of the passage?"

She eyed their still-clasped hands. "Perhaps you should take yourselves off someplace more private?"

"There is nary a corner of Dunlaidir that isn't private these days." Catherine's fingers tensed in his hand. "Lest you happen to be about," she added, looking at her friend. "You, my lady, appear to be everywhere."

"Truly?" Rhona affected an injured look. "Then I shall visit poor Sir Lachlan's bedside and see to my duties."

With feigned subservience, she wheeled about and reached for the solar's door latch. Somehow, the edge of her basket bumped against Marmaduke's right side and he winced, drawing in a sharp breath as his ribs, still aching from his tangle with the submerged sea rocks, throbbed and burned.

Pressing his lips together, he waited for the pulsing waves of hot discomfort to recede. The saints knew he'd suffered worse in his time.

Without doubt, his lady's friend had jabbed her basket into him a-purpose, cleverly maneuvering herself so she could rake her makeshift weapon along his bruised ribs.

But why?

He knew women too well not to recognize a ploy.

"Faith and mercy!" Rhona cried then, her brows arcing upward. "James told me you'd hurt your side repairing the latrine chute. Now I've gone and made it worse. How clumsy I am."

Looking over-pleased with herself, she thrust her small bowl of foul-smelling unguent into Catherine's free hand. "'Tis crushed St. John's wort and betony," she said. "Little is better for treating wounds."

Her gaze flicked briefly to Marmaduke's side. "Perhaps the salve will lend a spot of comfort to my lord's bruised ribs?"

Before his lady could reply, Rhona slipped inside the solar, shutting the door behind her.

"Come you, I would see that squint now," Marmaduke said as quickly, and hoped the shadows hid his elation.

He glanced at the wooden bowl of healing unguent clutched in his lady's hand. Thanks to her friend's mischief, she now had little choice but to smooth the salve onto his abraded flesh.

The corners of his mouth fought to widen into a wolfish grin, but he resisted the urge and thanked the saints instead.

For good measure, he also sent a nod of gratitude to the old gods so many Highlanders still honored.

That done, he drew a fortifying breath.

"Let us be gone from here," he urged again. "I would be most obliged if you will apply your friend's unguent to my ribs."

"In the laird's lug?" She looked up at him, her gaze skeptical.

“Of course.”

The snug comfort of such a confined space suddenly boasted an appeal of a much different nature than merely shielding them from unwanted listeners.

“And will you?” He indicated his proffered arm. “Tend my scrapes, I mean?”

She hesitated the breadth of a heartbeat, then linked her arm with his. “Aye, sir, I will,” she agreed with a slight tremor in her voice. “Such is my debt as Dunlaidir’s mistress.”

Not the most flattering answer, but still...

Her acceptance of the task sent warmth coursing through him.

“Then lead on, my lady,” he said.

And as they moved down the darkened corridor, he breathed another silent prayer of appreciation for this small victory.

He hadn’t yet won the battle, but with a spot of unexpected help, he’d successfully laid the groundwork for besieging his lady’s heart.

Chapter 18

Caterine led the way into her bedchamber, a sanctum she'd never have dreamed to welcome a Sassunach, champion knight sent by her sister, or otherwise.

Yet here he was, and Sir Marmaduke Strongbow passed through her privy quarters with all the lordly confidence of the master of the keep.

Without even glancing at her great curtained bed, its coverings already turned back for the coming night's rest, he entered the chamber's tiny ante-room.

"Behind the chest and tapestry?" he guessed, his gaze latching on the secret door's hiding place.

Caterine nodded.

Words weren't necessary.

The ante-room's walls were bare save a small assortment of cloaks hanging from pegs, a few sputtering torchlights, and two very narrow windows facing straight out onto the night.

Heart in her throat, her pulse louder in her ears than the howling wind, she watched him shove the large iron-bound strongbox out of the way, then lift the Flemish tapestry to reveal a low round-headed door cut into the thickness of the wall.

The door's rusty hinges screeched protest when he opened it, and a whoosh of stale air sailed into the little room, the musty smell a clear challenge to any daring enough to breach the dark threshold and mount the curving stair beyond.

"Can we not speak here?" Setting Rhona's healing unguent on the chest, Caterine rubbed her arms against the chill damp streaming in through the unshuttered window slits.

Better to freeze than suffocate on age-old dust and mold.

Rather than answer her, Marmaduke took one of the resin torches from its bracket on the wall, and, holding it aloft, indicated the worn stone steps circling upward into the darkness. "My sorrow that such a measure is needed," he said, his gaze compelling her to follow him.

For here was a man whose commanding presence held such power, a stone carving would melt at his feet.

A female stone carving.

Caterine hitched up her skirts and climbed the winding stairs behind him. He'd already thrust the torch into an iron holder on the wall when she stepped into the closeness of the laird's lug and the flames cast dancing shadows all about them, lending a dreamlike atmosphere to the tiny chamber.

Little more than a widening in the thickness of the wall, the laird's lug offered two spy holes. One gave a fair view of the great hall directly below, while the other allowed a glance straight into the minstrels' gallery just beyond the farthest wall.

The cramped space made the English knight seem taller, his broad shoulders wider, and the poor lighting erased his scar and shadowed his bad eye, leaving only the proud, masculine lines of a nobly formed, strikingly handsome face.

One he no doubt wanted to show her but could never have done by the light of day or in the great hall with scores of blazing torches everywhere, the many candles that lit the long tables.

But he showed her now, and what she saw was a face that won hearts.

Arabella's heart.

Suddenly needing air, she went to the spy hole that looked down on the hall. She stood on her toes to draw in great gulps of the less offensive air pouring in through the small opening.

Air seasoned with the tang of wood-smoke and roasting meats rather than the stifling scent of old stone and closed places.

Far below, men clustered at the trestle tables, noisily tucking into the evening meal. They argued, for their raised voices carried, the deeper ones echoing off the spy chamber's walls and ceiling.

But Caterine scarce heard their grousing.

She only heard another woman's name.

She swung round to face her champion. "You will think me devilish bold, sir, but I am not a woman prone to courtly airs," she said with as much dignity as she could muster. "I have little patience with such foolery and prefer plain speaking. Thus, I must say, for whatever purpose you dragged me up here, I shall make poor company lest you tell me who-"

"Who Arabella was?"

"Was?"

"Sadly so, for she lives no more." Stepping closer, he cradled her face between his hands, a wealth of loss and empty years mirrored in the depths of his good eye. "Arabella MacKenzie was my liege laird's sister, and she was my wife."

"Oh." Caterine gulped back the cold shame swelling in her throat. Guilt because his answer both sorrowed and relieved her. "Will you

tell me of her?" she asked, wincing inwardly when a shadow of discomfort crossed his face.

Ill-ease swept over her, too, for the intimacy of the laird's lug and the warmth of his large hands on her face stirred disturbing emotions deep inside her, and left her more open, more vulnerable, than she'd ever been.

"I do not often speak of her," he said as he slid his hands behind her neck and began caressing the sensitive skin of her nape. "Even so, she is never far from my thoughts."

"I understand." Catherine sighed, her shame falling away, washed free by the bliss of his touch, banished by the tingling warmth his gently massaging fingers sent spilling through her.

"I would still hear of her," she said after a few moments. "I would know of your late wife."

"As you wish," the English knight agreed. "My Arabella was a proud and passionate woman," he began, the words overlaid with a dark, hollow tone as if wrenched from the very depths of his soul. "She died because she overheard a plot to murder her brother, Duncan MacKenzie. The perpetrators were my lord's own lady wife and his half-brother, the harlot's lover. They poisoned Arabella to still her tongue."

"God's mercy!" Catherine gasped. "Were they punished?" she asked in a tight voice, her conscience smiting her for encouraging him. The pain on his face shattered the casing of her heart with more effectiveness than any silvered words.

"They are both dead," he said after a long moment. "And I have no doubt they've had to account for their wickedness before a greater judge than man."

Staring past her, he heaved a great sigh. "The strife they caused has long been laid to rest and is best forgotten. Life goes on and it is the privilege of the living to make the best we can of each new day."

"You speak like a holy man."

"I am no monk, that I assure you," he said, a trace of amusement in his voice.

"Nor am I a fool." He let his fingers light briefly on the scar slashing across his cheek. "As you see, I was left with a living reminder of the dark deeds done that day, but I learned well from the errors I made."

"That is when you were scarred?"

He nodded. "My own foolhardiness damned me as much as my opponent's mastery with a sword," he said, and blew out a breath of clear frustration. "So outraged was I, that I ignored the most elemental rule of swordplay and let my emotions make me careless. The mistake cost me dear."

"I am sorry."

Caterine looked at him in the muted light, seeing not the Englishman, but simply a man.

One who'd lost much.

"What has gone before cannot be undone," he said, his tone indicating he meant more than his own ill-starred past. "Nor are all hurtful experiences entirely bad if we learn and grow from them. The burdens I've carried have made me a wiser, more cautious man."

He paused, waiting as a particularly boisterous clamor from the hall below swelled into the laird's lug, then slowly ebbed away. "I will not allow you to fall prey to the same underhanded machinations that cost Arabella her life."

"That is why you wished to speak to me here? To caution me that you fear a traitor moves amongst us?"

"I do not fear it, I am certain of it," he said. "James was indeed fallen upon by two intruders, though I would ask you to keep the knowledge to yourself. Someone in your household aided the second miscreant in his escape."

He stepped back from her then, and the sudden withdrawal of his warmth, his strength, left her almost shivering.

Clasping his hands behind his back, he began pacing the spy chamber's scant length. "I've sealed off the cliff-side latrine chute, thus rendering that access useless, but such precautions are of little avail if someone within your walls would throw wide the gate for your enemies."

"Mercy. I do not like the sound of that."

"And you shouldn't, my lady."

"Then what precautions would you suggest?"

"Your priest will proclaim the third banns for our nuptials in a few days and he tells me we can be wed in a sennight." Pausing, he peered hard at her. "Until the day, and as of this night, I shall bed down in your ante-room."

"But-"

"We have both been married before. No one will raise a brow if they believe we wish to become better acquainted before you wear my ring."

Caterine's gaze dropped to his ruby signet ring. Just looking at it, and knowing its significance, sent a slow-pulsing warmth curling through the lowest part of her belly.

"I do not wish to wear your ring," she said anyway. "The marriage is to be in name only. A pretense."

"A pretense only works if it is believed."

"You cannot sleep in my ante-room."

He folded his arms. "Only until we speak our vows."

Relief, and a wee tinge of regret, sluiced through Caterine.

But not for long.

Her eyes flew wide. "What do you mean *only until*?"

"Exactly that," he allowed, feigning a look of mock innocence some secret part of her found endearing.

"Once we are wed, I shall sleep where all good husbands are wont to sleep," he informed her. "In my lady wife's bed."



IN A DIFFERENT TOWER CHAMBER, one located at the very end of yet another of Dunlaidir's winding passageways, James Keith sprawled in a chair before his hearth fire, nursing his aching leg and his fouler mood.

Across the room, his great four-poster bed loomed empty and cold, a silent sentinel to his dark musings and his inability to fill the room's splendor with aught but his own fool self and his more foolish dreams.

Annoyed, he pushed to his feet and limped to the windows. The most magnificent in all of Dunlaidir, the bank of tall, traceried windows followed the curve of the chamber wall, so offering sweeping views not only of the endless expanse of the sea, but also of the rugged cliffs on which the stronghold stood.

Night-blackened now, their shutters flung wide to embrace the wet chill and racing wind, the opened windows looked out on an impenetrable curtain of darkness.

A perfect reflection of James' own self.

And his prospects as master of this pile of stone perched on the edge of the sea.

The Laird's Stone hadn't yet wept for him, Rhona had told him earlier, as she'd reminded him every night since his father's passing.

But it would, she'd hasten to assure him.

As if her words would make it so.

Too bad he knew otherwise.

Furious that it was so, he inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the cold salt air. If only he could fill his heart with the valor that should have been bred in the bones of one such as he, then perhaps the stone would acknowledge him.

But daring and skill couldn't be absorbed as easily as chill briny air, nor could hard, iron-fisted fathers be pleased by less than the ablest of sons.

And the Laird's Stone wouldn't cry for a failure.

Bracing one hand against the stone edge of the nearest window, James tried to ignore the throbbing in his leg. But he could no sooner vanquish the knifing pain than he could block out the roar of the sea

crashing against the rocks below.

Or stop his ears from straining to catch a lighter sound, one he waited for each night: Rhona's footfalls as she neared his door with an ewer of wine.

A nightly ritual.

An innocent game he suspected she concocted to make him feel like the lord he wasn't.

The *laird's due*, she called it. Something she claimed he needed before retiring – his wine cup replenished.

Scowling, he almost hurled the empty chalice out the opened window. Instead, he clenched his fingers around its cold stem until his foul mood receded. He didn't need spirits to aid his slumber.

He needed Rhona. Her open arms and willing kisses. Not the libations she dispensed so sweetly each night.

Nae, not sweetly.

Provocatively.

For, of late, she often appeared at his door with the neckline of her gown dipping so low, he'd swear she purposely altered them, or at the least, loosened their ties.

And all to torment him with a bounty offered but not served.

Sure of it, he turned away from the windows and returned to his chair. He settled onto its cold oaken seat with a *harrumph* angry and bold enough to suit the most jaded laird-watchers.

Then he cradled his empty wine cup in the palm of one hand and waited for the light footfalls and quick tap-tapping on his door that would herald another torturously sweet visit by the lass he hoped to make his own.

He also waited for the coming dawn and his first lesson in lordly sword wielding. Instruction in the fine art of being a braw Scottish laird.

Lessons offered and taught by an English knight.

The irony stung his pride but also gave him hope.

Hope enough to chisel a bit of the scowl off his face and inspire him to thank the saints for his saucy lass and her meddling ways.

Chapter 19

“I will make you a bargain, my lady.” Sir Marmaduke examined the red-gleaming facets of his signet ring’s sizable ruby, feigning greater interest in the gemstone than in the look on Lady Catherine’s face.

She wore an expression unflattering enough to dash all hope of the advantage he’d thought to gain from the spy chamber’s dimness.

Even so, he braved her unblinking stare, trusting that the slight narrowing of her eyes had more to do with her stubborn pride than any true aversion to his intentions.

“I do not like to bargain,” she said at last.

“Then a promise.”

“What kind?” She glanced at his ring.

Good. It was the perfect focus for what he was about to say.

“Lady, I am not an untried youth,” he began. “I am a man, and fully equipped with the usual accoutrements, I assure you. I will not promise you a chaste marriage bed for that would be a falsehood before the words left my tongue.”

He raised her hand to his lips. “But I swear I shall never touch you intimately lest you will that I do so.”

Her eyes flew wide. “Meaning you shall touch me in *non*-intimate ways? At will? As it suits you?”

“Nay, my lady, my desire is to suit your will.”

“Perhaps I do not wish to be suited?”

“Then, once you are mine, I shall be the more hard-pressed to convince you otherwise.” He released her hand. “And to please you.”

Something flared in her eyes. Temper, disbelief, or perhaps even a spark of interest. “You believe you can?”

“Convince you or please you?”

“Both.”

“I shall aim for both.” He made the words a surety. “Especially the pleasing part.”

Touching his ring to the tip of her nose, he added, “As you shall please me.”

Faugh! She would sooner diddle the devil, his demons roared with

malicious glee.

Fortunately, their insolence only strengthened his determination, and spurred him to pursue a swifter path to his goal. Such as having her massage the healing ointment onto his flesh.

Now.

He glanced about the shadowy laird's lug for the little bowl, remembering too late that she'd left the sharp-smelling unguent in the ante-room.

For a long moment, silence hung between them, its heavy pall coating the air. The night must have lengthened, for thick quiet rose from the great hall as well.

Dunlaidir's occupants, their hunger sated and their thirst quenched, had either sought out their guard posts or laid themselves to rest.

Save two.

And one of the two peered at him with as much doubt peeking out from the blue pools of her luminous eyes as he kept secreted under lock and key in the deepest pit of his soul.

"You think I shall please you?" Her hushed words came so soft Marmaduke scarce believed he'd heard them.

But he had, and they melted his heart.

"I know you shall." He lifted her chin, held her gaze. "Never doubt it."



CATERINE SWALLOWED, her heart beating faster. *I do not want to consider such matters at all*, her good sense warned, ignoring the shivery sensations spilling through her. The rich timbre of his voice as well as the portent of his words wrapped her in a wondrously languid warmth.

He made her feel wanted.

And almost at ease enough to relax, enjoy pleasure.

Had a man ever looked at her with such an intensely focused expression? She knew the answer, felt another ripple of awareness as he traced his fingers along her cheek, then eased his hand around the back of her neck. His caress, light as a summer breeze, sent more such tingles fanning through her.

Sensations she'd only known long-ago inklings of, but never the full glory, till now.

Then, somehow he was standing even closer, his gaze disturbingly knowing. How was it that with a mere look and the feather-light touch of his fingertips, he wooed her senses and stirred such pleasurable flutters low in her belly?

Something leapt inside her. Possibilities. But she pushed them aside, determined to worry about such things later.

For now...

She closed her eyes, reveled in his warmth and the bracing scents clinging to him: the fresh tang of the wind-whipped sea and cold, salty air, leather and clean, polished steel.

A hint of wood-smoke, a pleasing note of sandalwood, and the magic of starry nights and moonbeams.

Starry nights and moonbeams?

Her eyes snapped open.

She bit her lower lip, and tried not to inhale.

"Lady." He smiled. "Have I unsettled you?"

"Nae," she lied. "Not at all."

"I am glad." He lowered his hand and stepped back, his withdrawal leaving her breathless.

Stunned, more than a little confused, and yearning for more of the magic he'd shown her.

She lifted her own hand to her nape and skimmed her fingertips over the place where he'd touched her.

The skin there still tingled.

Equally disturbing, her heart hadn't yet ceased knocking against her ribs.

"Will you apply the unguent now, Catherine?" His voice came deeper, a shade huskier than before. "Perhaps below, before the fire in your chamber?"

"I am not sure that is wise."

"Who would object?" He arched his good brow, the look he gave her as seductive as the silken richness of his voice. "All here know I am your champion."

"It is wrong." She stood as if frozen, but inside, she burned, her senses awakening, licked by wicked flames. "My bedchamber is—"

"A place every lady should feel most secure," he said, his voice compelling. "There, more than anywhere else you need ease and security, the abandonment of your cares."

"Aye..." She nodded, not trusting herself to say more.

"Then all is well."

"Um-h'mm..." She glanced down, smoothed her skirts, hoping to dry the dampness from her palms. Do something to compensate for her inability to form coherent words.

He suffered no such affliction.

With all the mastery of a well-practiced spell-caster, his words and his touch worked their magic. Little by little, he tore loose the locks and restraints shielding her from his charm, ripping down her defenses and casting every last shred of her resistance to the four

winds.

His Englishness remained the one thing he couldn't undo, but, much to her surprise, even that no longer seemed so annoying.

So long as he looked at her as he was doing now.

"Shall we go?" He lifted a brow, nodding once when she hitched her skirts to follow him. "Come, then," he said, leading her along the few steps to the spy chamber's door.

She waited as he lifted the resin torch from its bracket on the wall. Then, her chest tight with prickling anticipation, she went with him down the winding stair and through the little ante-room, pausing only long enough to retrieve the bowl of healing salve before tagging after him into her bedchamber.

He made straight for the hearth, his bold claiming of her privy quarters and the ease with which he moved through them, sending tingly anticipation spiraling through her. Just watching him breathed life into her dormant hopes and dreams, long-lost bundles of wishes winking at her from the farthest reaches of her heart.

Unbidden, the layer of years peeled away, falling aside as if time no longer existed, leaving only the fanciful girl she'd once been and the woman she was fast becoming.

A woman entranced, and very close to entering the untrodden realm of her own beckoning femininity.

Content to simply look at him, she paused a few steps into her bedchamber, allowing herself a moment to savor the wonder of him before other memories could intrude, their hold on her, sealing the door to her soul.

A door he'd cracked with ease.

Unthinkable, if ever he flung it wide.



"YOU SAID MY SISTER CHARMED YOU," Catherine blurted, those other memories pushing hard on the door. "I do not believe you. You are the enchanter, the one who ensnares, pulling others into your web of smooth words and moonspun magic."

"Say you?" He cast a skeptical glance at the closed shutters stretching the length of the far wall. Nary a glimmer of moonlight fell through the wooden slats.

Even the deep alcove of the window embrasure with its two facing seats proved cloaked in shadow.

Looking back at her, he cocked a brow.

The gesture spoke volumes.

"There isn't a moon this night," he said anyway. "Only a storm."

"I am aware of both those facts." Catherine pulled her *arisaid* more

securely around her shoulders. "Especially the storm."

"I see that you are," he said, not meaning a whit of the wind and rain blasting through the night. "I, too, have noted it," he added.

And meant the storm inside her.

As had she.

He glanced at the bowl of unguent in her hand. Catherine followed his gaze, felt a bit dizzy. Had he truly cast a spell over her? Something strange was happening between them. And whatever it was, it made her pulse race and caused fluttery warmth to spread all through her.

She swallowed, already wishing she hadn't agreed to smear the salve on his ribs.

The very thought unnerved her.

She stood looking at him, unable to move.

Bone-chilling damp filled her bedchamber, but she burned with the heat of a thousand flaming torches. Someone, most likely the ever faithful Eoghann, had stoked the hearth fire, but its quiet warmth couldn't match the fire raging in her belly.

Not could its welcoming glow and smoky-sweet scent entice her to take a single step forward.

Across the room, the burning peat hissed and spit on the grate, seeming to warn her to keep her distance lest she surrender to the English knight's allure.

A shockingly powerful draw already gripped her. It'd started the moment he'd stepped to the edge of the fire's glow and began unbuckling his sword belt.

"I said I would tell you how your sister charmed me." He removed his belt, placing it and his sword on a nearby table. "Would you believe I could not even smile before she began plying me with potent healing concoctions to relax my damaged facial muscles?"

Catherine blinked. Thinking of her sister made the corners of her own lips curve upward. "Linnet was always good with herbs and healing."

"She healed hearts, too. Especially my liege's." He paused to strip off his tunic. "Saints, we thought he no longer even possessed one, but she proved us wrong. She swept into our lives, spilling light and laughter in her wake, seeing only the best in us all.

"That is how she charmed us," he finished, tossing his tunic onto a chair.

Charmed as well, Catherine's feet took a few steps toward him.

Holding his hands to the fire, he flexed his fingers. "Your sister slayed many dragons at Eilean Creag."

"I am not surprised." Catherine understood. "She has a good heart."

"I would slay your dragons, my lady," her champion vowed. "If you will let me."

"If I..." She paused, freezing where she stood. Too captivated by his chivalry and the hard-muscled expanse of his chest to think, much less continue across the rush-strewn floor.

She did lift her chin. "You have done enough, good sir. I am grateful of your help in ridding us of Sir Hugh's tyranny."

"I did not mean de la Hogue." His words confirmed what she suspected. "I would battle the dragons gnawing at you from within. Let me banish them."

"Some beasts are greater than any champion's sword."

His gaze warmed. "A sword is not a man's only weapon, my lady."

To Catherine's surprise, she suddenly found herself standing frightfully close to him.

"You truly couldn't smile?" she blurted the first thing that popped into her mind.

Anything to veer away from her dragons and the treacherous sea they swam in.

"I could do little but grimace, so tight was the skin around my scar," he told her, one finger worrying the pale seam marring the left side of his face. "Nor did I have much cause to smile in those days."

"You're smiling now."

"So I am," he said, a twinkle lighting his good eye. "Times change, and I find I have much to be pleased about these days."

"Linnet may have enchanted you, my lord, but I am sure you beguiled her as well."

As you are now beguiling me. A truth that surprised her almost as much as discovering her fingers dipping into the healing unguent.

Dipping most eagerly.

Looking quite pleased with himself, he said, "So you think I'm a charmer?"

"I think you cast some sort of spell over my sister." It was as close to the truth as she'd go. "Especially if you smiled at her like that."

With the same heart-melting smile that now drew her unguent-smearing fingers to the bruised flesh of his ribs.

They hovered there, just above his skin.

Too shy to touch him, too captivated to retreat.

He gave a short laugh. "Lady, I admire your sister greatly, but I never once looked at her as I am now looking at you." He glanced at her hovering fingers. "And never have I craved a woman's touch more than I desire yours this moment."

Catherine's pulse quickened.

Unfortunately, she also swallowed.

Not a dainty, lady-like attempt to recover her composure, but a bold, hopefully not too audible gulp.

With effort, she tore her gaze from the taut-muscled plane of his

abdomen and her wavering, ointment-coated fingertips. She looked up to discover he no longer smiled, but peered at her as if he could see into each and every corner of her soul.

Even more disturbing, she had the impression he was doing the one thing she didn't want...

He was wooing her.

Chapter 20

“S hall we begin?” Sir Marmaduke’s voice came rougher than

he’d intended, but he thanked the saints he could speak at all. So much depended on this moment, this danger-fraught foray into winning Lady Caterine’s trust.

Her heart, body, and soul.

One false look, word, or touch, and he could lose her. The risk sat like a cold knot in his gut, his own doubts riding his shoulders, weighing him down more than if he’d heaved a sack of stones across his back.

So when she said nothing, he answered himself...

“Yes, it is time,” he said, holding her gaze. Then he curled his fingers around her wrists and guided her hands the rest of the way to his midsection. He used his own hands to keep hers pressed lightly against his flesh, moving her salve-dipped fingers in slow, comfort-spending circles over his sore ribs and his stomach.

He also took great care to assure that her fingertips slid over each sculpted ridge of muscle he possessed.

Her soft gasp rewarded his efforts.

Marmaduke smiled.

His heart sang, for her quick indrawn breath couldn’t be mistaken for anything but what it was: a sign of female appreciation.

A reaction he knew well for there was nothing lacking about his muscles, or his manhood.

His prowess could match the best of men.

Oft were the nights he could choose amongst a fawning swarm of comely maids, each one eager to lift her skirts and discover if the rumors about his mastery at pleasing a willing wench proved true.

And never yet had one left his bed disappointed.

Only he remained unfulfilled, his ease taken, but his soul more needy of sustenance than before. The kind of nourishment he’d never find with such light-skirts, however skilled in carnal passion.

His lady drew a sharp breath then, obviously realizing he’d released her wrists and that her fingers, no longer spreading the salve over his ribs, now explored the taut, hard-muscled flesh just above his

waistband, the line of fine, dark hair arrowing beneath it.

"Oh!" She jerked her hands from his abdomen, two bright spots of color staining her cheeks. "I didn't intend... I mean-"

"Surely you have touched a man's body?" He lifted a brow, watching her. "You are a widow, and chatelaine of this stronghold. Hospitality duties alone deem that-"

"Assisting visiting noblemen with their baths is different," she rushed to say. "Such courtesies mean nothing. This, just now..." She made a fluttery motion with her hands and her *arisaid* slipped off her shoulders. Digging her hands into its folds, she clung to the woolen wrap as if it were a shield.

But she didn't pull it back up around her shoulders.

Instead, she lifted her chin and met his gaze. "I have never skimmed my fingers along a man's body hair, good sir."

Marmaduke almost choked on her frankness. Her bluntness shot straight to his loins, and he could no sooner ignore the insistent pull there than keep himself from enjoying the creamy expanse of flesh now exposed above her gown's plunging neckline.

"You are a woman of plain speech," he managed, his voice two shades gruffer than he would have liked.

"So I have been told." She glanced toward the windows where the full fury of the storm now battered the closed shutters. The night's damp chill warred with the peat fire's gentle warmth and challenged the sputtering flames of the wall torches. "I suppose it is one of my greatest faults."

"Not a fault, my lady. I would say it's refreshing." Marmaduke watched her as she stared at the windows. He let his gaze drift over her, admiring the clean, proud line of her profile, the straightness of her back, and the fullness of her breasts. The cold air, or perhaps something else, caused her breasts to rise, the movement revealing their hardened peaks.

Sweet crests that beckoned to him, enticements so close to the top edge of her gown a mere flick of his fingers would release them.

He swallowed thickly, wished the front flap of his tunic still covered his groin, the pesky evidence of his arousal.

"Well, then." He kept his gaze on her, deciding to be as direct. "Did you mind touching me thus?"

"It was not wholly unpleasant," she said, her voice barely audible above the lashing rain.

Not wholly unpleasant?

Marmaduke fought back a disgruntled *harrumph*.

"I found it most pleasant." He drew himself to his full height. "Pleasing enough to ask you to do it again."

Her brows shot upward. "Skim my fingers along your body hair?"

The bold wording grabbed fast to his maleness and squeezed.

A firm, rousing grip.

"Rub more of the salve on my stomach," he ground out, amazed his voice didn't crack.

"And," he added, the unquenched throbbing in his nether parts urging him to press his good fortune, "you may slide your fingers to wherever, or whatever catches your favor."

Most especially the sizable specimen of man-flesh she will find if you peel down your hose for her, the devil whispered in his ear.

Marmaduke breathed deep. Her scent wafted about her, light, feminine, and way too tempting.

"Lady, the good saints themselves would weep if they knew the great comfort your hands afforded me just now." He spread his arms wide and nodded to the little bowl sitting so innocently on the nearby table. "Will you not continue until all the healing salve has been used?"

"Continue?" She hesitated, her white-knuckled grip still holding fast to her *arisaid* as her deep blue gaze slid over the hard-slabbed muscles of his shoulders and chest. Then she met his gaze, appeared to consider. "I don't know..."

"I would be much indebted. And there is still a good portion of unguent."

"Aye," she agreed. Then she let go of her wrap, pleasing him immensely by scooping up a fat dollop of the ointment. "It would be a shame to waste the salve."

"Indeed."

Pleasing him even more, her attention dropped to his stomach and lingered almost expectantly near the waistband of his hose as if she wished he'd strip off that covering as swiftly as he'd whipped off his tunic.

The thought sent a fresh surge of blood pumping through his loins, filling him in a way the thin wool of his hose couldn't begin to disguise.

Yet she looked on, seemingly fascinated by the taut muscles of his abdomen, her fingers spreading the cold salve in ever-wider circles over his abraded flesh.

And all the while, his manhood swelled and lengthened beneath the ever-more-uncomfortable confinement of his hose.

At last she lowered her gaze, no longer peering at his midsection but at *him*, the essence of his masculinity.

A roguish beast no longer his own.

Her fingers stilled. "Merciful heaven."

'Tis heaven indeed when properly tended, his demons roared with mirth.

Her eyes widening, she gasped again, an earthier, blood-firing gasp this time. The kind he'd not expected to hear from Catherine Keith's sweet lips for it was more the sensual sort of heavy-lidded moan man-eager light-skirts make at the sight of a ready-to-pleasure-them piece of well-aroused manhood.

For sure, it wasn't the gasp of a well-born lady raised on monkish preachings against the joys of the flesh.

But then, Catherine Keith wasn't just any lady.

She was a plain-speaking one.

"Your men spoke true," she said, proving it. "You are over-large."

"I am...er-" Marmaduke almost choked, unable to finish.

"Aye, you are." She looked up at last. "Exceedingly so."

"Ah, well..." he managed. "You are good at judging such endowments?"

He regretted the words at once for he'd meant to jest, yet she said nothing, only looked at him.

Blessedly, at his face.

And she didn't need to tell him how she'd come by such knowledge.

That sad truth stood in her eyes, making clear her experience hadn't come from bathing visiting knights and tending the wounded.

His ardor deflated, Marmaduke resisted the urge to scowl as darkly as the frowning crags on which her castle stood.

Saints forbid, she'd think his displeasure targeted her and not a past that hadn't been kind.

Steeling himself against his own ghosts, he drew a deep demon-banishing breath.

"Lady, you asked about Arabella," he said, the calm of his tone at stark contrast to the knot in his gut. "I shall tell you of her, and how I came to renounce my own blood."

"I want to learn of her," she said, her frank gaze revealing her willingness to listen, her resumption of her sweet ministrations, sealing his fate. "I would know everything."

"Then you shall."

Saints, he would spin her the *Song of Roland* in its entirety if only she would continue to gentle her fingers over his flesh in such a bewitching manner.

"My tale is not a chivalrous one." He had to warn her. "Fore God, it is quite ugly. Will you still hear it?"

"Of course," she said, her hands moving to his shoulders, kneading the muscles there. "She was your wife. I am most intrigued to hear of her. And how you came to pledge fealty to my sister's husband."

"Then so be it."

Though each word would cost him, he knew a satisfaction deeper

than the solace of her gifted fingers, for while her face still appeared a shade too pale, a spark of interest now replaced the dimness that had cloaked her beautiful eyes just moments ago.

"It is hard for you to remember." She slid her hands down the outsides of his arms, massaging the tenseness. "You can tell me another time."

"Nay." Marmaduke closed his good eye for a moment, wished he didn't feel as if he stood at the edge of a bottomless pit. "I would that we have no secrets between us."

"If you are sure?"

"I am."

And so he girded himself, stared at the hearth's burning peat fire until its cheery reddish glow grew and surged, eventually becoming angry licking flames consuming the simple wattle-and-daub homes of the innocent.

Poor souls who happened to dwell on the wrong side of a border.

Bile rose in his throat and he almost swung away, breaking the spell of the past – and the magic of her hands – but then, to his amazement, a second pair of hands joined hers. Gentle and cool as Highland mist at dawn, they smoothed over him, helping her ease the knots in his shoulders, and his tongue.

A familiar touch, freeing him to tell her tale as well.

Releasing him to care for another.

A shudder tore down his spine, and then he began. "Many years ago, the summer I earned my spurs, I soon learned that shining symbol of knighthood was all I shared with my peers. That, and perhaps a too-generous dose of pride."

One pair of the caressing hands, the warm ones, stilled a beat. "'Tis known English knights are proud."

"That is so," he agreed. "Proud of rank and heritage, the privileges granted to them, and their hope of enough victories to dine off gold and silver."

He said no more, drew a deep, soul-cleansing breath, needing a moment to push aside the nightmare of his memories.

He just hoped the sharing of them wouldn't raise the darkness he sensed lurking deep in his new lady's soul.

“Did you not hope for victories?” Lady Catherine turned aside, dipped her fingers into the jar of healing salve. “Did you not crave fame and riches?”

“To be sure, I desired such things,” Marmaduke admitted, looking deep into her eyes when she faced him again. “All young nobles dream of shining steel, white chargers, and the favor of their king. I was no different. Indeed, I might’ve held greater ambitions than most.”

“Your tone says otherwise.” She began smoothing salve on his ribs again. “I hear regret.”

“I have them, that is true.”

“You are a great champion.” She looked at him, her brow pleated. “Did knighthood not bring you enough glory?”

“Knighthood disappointed me.” He held her gaze, bile beginning to rise in his throat. He continued all the same, “My values conflicted with my fellow knights. I honored virtue, loyalty, and the high reputation I believed went along with being one of England’s finest. But on my first foray into Scotland I learned that, for many, being a *Flower of English Chivalry* meant having a license to embark on career of outrages.”

“Outrages?”

“Yes, my lady.”

“I see,” she said, her tone and the look on her face saying everything.

Catherine of Dunlaidir knew exactly what he’d meant.

“You sought to stop these dark deeds,” she said, proving it.

“I did.” Marmaduke nodded. “I refused to take part in such villainy, especially against women. My peers’ chivalry toward the fairer sex did not extend across the border, or the classes.”

“What happened?”

Marmaduke’s gut twisted. “Terrible things. Soul-chilling, irreversible acts.”

Cold fingers traced his scar.

Loving fingers.

Ethereal ones meant to encourage when he may have faltered.

Lady Catherine dipped her strong, warm fingers into the salve-pot again, smoothed more of the unguent onto his ribs. "Did you wheel your horse about, gallop away across the moors, so ending your days as belted knight of England?"

"Nay," he told her, though he knew such a cowardly escape might have been wiser. "I took up my sword against my own men. Men I now think of as black-hearted sons of Satan for the wickedness they displayed that day. I would have cut down every last one of them, but these were amongst the best knights in the realm and I was one facing many."

"God's mercy," she breathed, her compassion melding the two pairs of tender hands into one.

And with Arabella's blessing came the strength to confront his other ghosts.

The English ones.

Ripping open old wounds forced him to relive every biting lash of the whip that had scored his back.

"You needn't tell me more if it distresses you."

Marmaduke blinked. "Nay, I do not mind, for it is how I came to meet my late wife. Further, I believe that good comes of all our trials and hardships, even if we must sometimes search far and long to see the truth of it."

Even so, a bitter taste filled his mouth. So many years later, he could still feel the corded flails shredding his flesh.

The worst pain of all had been knowing that English hands wielded the whip, for each time the lashes cut into his back, another of his youthful ideals had withered and died.

Until none remained.

Even his burning love of his homeland had been wrested from him that day.

"I was stripped and beaten," he finally told her, sparing her ears the vilest of the grisly deeds they'd rained upon him. "Flogged and left for dead by my own men."

"Duncan MacKenzie found you?"

"His father," Marmaduke amended. "That good man took me to his hall where his womenfolk nursed me to health. Every man, woman, and child beneath his roof welcomed me into their midst and refused to let me die. They tended my wounds, inside and out, and it's been my greatest honor to serve them ever since."

Glancing away, he stared at the slow-burning peat fire, once more seeing other flames, friendly ones this time. As were the faces evoked by recalling the massive hearth in Eilean Creag's great hall.

Then a strong gust of sea wind rattled the window shutters and the flames and the faces faded.

The memories remained.

"I am beginning to understand." Catherine trailed her fingertips along his collarbone, down his sides and then away. "Arabella was one of the women who tended you?"

"Nay, she was but a slip of a girl at the time." The images that had once made him throw back his head with laughter, now flooded him with pain. "She was ruled by her passions even then, a spitfire and hellion. She made faces at me and called me names some knights I'm acquainted with wouldn't know the meaning of."

"But she grew into a beautiful woman and stole your heart."

"That she did, my lady." Marmaduke couldn't lie. "And for all her devilry when I first arrived at Eilean Creag, not a night of our marriage passed that she didn't massage my blighted back."

"Do you think she'd mind if I lent you such comfort now?" The words came so soft they could've been a rustling of the wind.

No, she'd be pleased.

This time the words did carry on the chill breeze.

The hairs on Marmaduke's neck lifted and he started to answer, but already, his new lady had taken gentle hold of his arms and was turning him around.

She wanted to see his back.

A bone-crushing dread took hold of him then – the fear she'd cry out in horror, wholly repulsed. Or worse, that she'd pity him, and such a reaction would lance him deeper.

He held his breath.

"Come, you." She pulled him now, drawing him away from the peat fire's meager glow and closer to the nearest wall torch.

The one that burned the brightest.

"The old wounds pain me no more," he said, strangle-voiced. Already feeling the warmth from the blazing torch, full aware its hissing flames well-illuminated the maze of raised welts criss-crossing every inch of his bare back. "There is no need for you."

"God in heaven!" Her outrage dashed his dread in one fell swoop.

And swelled his heart.

Not a tone of revulsion colored her outburst. Nor the slightest tinge of pity.

Only indignation.

Then she was upon him, smoothing her bliss-spending fingers over the travesty that was his back. "Your men did this to you?" she railed, the horror in her voice clearly addressing his foes and not his ravaged flesh. "Your own peers?"

"Lords and barons of the land or belted knights, each one."

"May their bebased souls roast on the hottest hob in hell."

Marmaduke wheeled about, undone by her indignation. "Saints

cherish you,” he said, and rested his hands on her shoulders. “My back... *I do not repulse you?*”

“Mercy, nay.” Stepping closer, she traced the tip of one finger down the scar slashing across his face. “I told you once, sir, your scars mean naught to me. Each one is a badge of honor and any who does not see them thus is a fool.”

Marmaduke’s hopes soared, but they crashed to the rush-coated floor when her brow knit in a way that couldn’t be good.

For him, and most especially for his dreams.

Slipping free of his light hold on her shoulders, she moved to the table and filled two pewter cups with wine. She handed him one. “You are much to my liking,” she said in that plain-speaking way he’d so admired till now. “You’ll have seen I do not hide from truths, nor do I offer pretty words meant to deceive.”

Marmaduke waited.

She took a sip of wine. “But whether I am fond of you or nae,” she continued, and his heart plummeted deeper with each word, “I must tell you that I cannot accompany you when you leave here.”

As we told you she wouldn’t, his personal minions of Beelzebub boasted with glee.

Ignoring them, Marmaduke counted his blessings.

She’d forgotten to object to his sleeping in her ante-room.



AND SO IT came that many hours later, in the splendid solitude of that self-same little chamber, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow stood before one of the ante-room’s two narrow window slits and held council with the moon.

The distant orb, cold and aloof, sailed from behind a cloud. A lone one, wispy and thin, for the night’s winds had finally chased away the storm.

As he would whisk away his new lady’s reservations.

One by one until each dragon was slain and laid to rest.

Much like the cloudless heavens, his own night’s peace gained at last, he turned away from the little window and sought his rough pallet on the ante-room floor.

To sleep and rest his weary bones.

And dream of better days to come.

Chapter 22

Sir Marmaduke wakened well before dawn.

A light pitter of rain, a ferocious stiff neck, and his lady's soft breath on his bare shoulder, greeted him.

When she planted wet, tickling kisses along his upper arm, he smiled and opened his good eye – to stare straight into two round and unblinking brown ones.

“Gods!” He leapt to his feet, instantly awake.

Leo yelped as loudly, any friendly overtures he may have been trying to initiate, forgotten. The little dog streaked from the ante-room before Marmaduke could even scowl at him.

He did frown into the semi-darkness as he yanked on his braies. His hose, tunic and boots were donned as quickly, his sword belt girded on with equal haste.

And all the while, he pretended not to notice Leo's offended glare boring holes in him from Lady Catherine's bed. The sneaky bugger even had the cheek to curl himself most proprietarily against her bared thigh.

Marmaduke's frown deepened as he tried not to stare at the sleek expanse of naked leg, temptation revealed by the careless whim of the mussed bedcoverings.

An unexpected delight that caught him off guard and propelled him right out the door before he forgot his desire to woo her gently. Just now, he could so easily heed his baser urges.

God forbid.

Had she wakened and peered at him from sleepy blue eyes, her lips full and rosy-sweet, her lovely leg so innocently displayed, he may well have done more than bid her a good morrow.

Glad she slept so deeply, he set off down the passageway, making for the stairs to the great hall. Once below, he went straight to the laver set into the back wall of a shadowed alcove.

Blessed relief was almost his.

Stepping up to the stone basin, he thrust his hands into the freezing water and splashed a goodly amount on his face.

Then, his features carefully schooled lest some stealthy varlet be

watching him, he scanned the hall.

All slept.

Relieved, he cocked his head, listening to the assorted snores, wheezes, and other indefinable noises coming from the men still slumbering on their pallets.

No one would stir for a while.

And so...

Allowing himself a pained smile, he pulled his hose away from his body and dashed ice-cold water onto his unruly manhood.

Purging deliverance came swift and sweet.

This relieved, he readjusted his hose and continued on his way, the fearsome look on his face a warning to anyone fool enough to admit having seen him tend himself in such an absurd manner.

And if James Keith so much as lifted a brow over the damp stain on the front flap of his tunic, he'd forget his assurances that they'd train with blunted swords and insist on instructing the young lord with real blades.

The razor sharp variety capable of splitting a hair.

A curse and the clatter of steel skittering across stone alerted him to James' presence in the undercroft the moment he reached the bottom of the dank stairwell that curled down to Dunlaidir's lowest level.

Cold and sparsely-lit by a smattering of pitch-pine torches and what gray light could slip through a handful of the stair tower's arrow slits, the groin-vaulted basement provided a secure storeroom for the stronghold's most valuable provisions while its semi-underground location and thick walls offered a more private arena for James to learn the fine art of lairding than the open bailey where Marmaduke preferred to train.

Careful not to venture near a teetering pile of arrows and crossbow bolts, he paused in the less hazardous shadow cast by a wall of stacked wine barrels. So hidden, he watched as James snatched up his fallen sword and, frowning darkly, thrust and lunged at a side of hanging salt beef.

Lunged most miserably, but not because of any lack of balance. Nay, his legs and well-muscl'd arms seemed in good working order.

It was the anger in his face that ruined what could have been a perfect parry.

"Would you truly hope to live by the sword, you'd best learn to bury your temper before you unsheathe your blade," Marmaduke said, striding forward.

James halted mid-lunge and nearly toppled to the stone-flagged floor. "I was-"

"-on the best path to having an arm lopped off," Marmaduke

finished for him, unbuckling his sword belt and placing it atop a creel of rolled oxhides.

Stretching his arms above his head, he cracked his knuckles, then helped himself to a blunted practice sword propped against one of the thick pillars supporting the vaulted ceiling.

He stood still a few moments, testing the blade's feel.

"Such passion as blazes in your eyes is better spent in a fair maid's arms than on the field." Turning slightly to the side, he feigned interest in the well not far from where they stood. "There, in the heat of battle, you'll only retain your limbs if you keep your wits."

The warning spoken, he whirled on James, his blade slicing the air with a speed that would have left an onlooker reeling with dizziness. In the blink of an eye, James' sword hit the floor and the blunted end of Marmaduke's pressed firmly beneath the younger man's chin.

"That was your first lesson, my friend. A cool head, or no head. The choice is yours."

James bristled. "Did I not wish to learn, I would not be here."

"Good so." Lowering his blade, Marmaduke used its tip to motion to the fallen sword. "Shall we begin?"

"I thought we had," James huffed and swiped up his sword.

"A mere exchange of pleasantries until we've worked the ire out of you. Now heed the look on my face and imitate it."

"There isn't a look on your face. It's blank."

"Exactly." Marmaduke backed up a few paces and took on a fighting stance. "You'd best master appearing disinterested now, because on the morrow you shall have an audience. A comely dark-haired lass whose presence will help you learn to ignore distractions."

James blanched. "You wouldn't."

Marmaduke cocked a brow. "She'll agree, too. I am certain of it."

"God's bones." James tipped back his head, stared at the ceiling.

"All that stands between you and bettering yourself as a swordsman is proper motivation," Marmaduke said. "The desire to win Lady Rhona's admiration will spur your drive to improve your skills."

"You know I favor her." James shot him an accusatory glance. Leaning on his practice sword, his chest heaved as if they'd already engaged in a few rounds. "I will not have her here to—"

"Cool your blood or I will fetch her now."

"She will see my clumsiness."

"She will see your triumph," Marmaduke corrected. "If you so will it."

"Humph." James eyes narrowed, a cold expression settling over his handsome face as he lifted his sword.

Sensing James was as prepared as he'd ever be, Marmaduke

beckoned to him.

“Have at me,” he encouraged, his own sword at the ready. “Pretend you are at a great tourney, your lady is watching and she’s just tossed you a ribbon from her hair. Imagine her eyes twinkling with the promise of later delights.”

James sliced the air with his blade. “You are cruel.”

Marmaduke smiled. “I have been called worse.”

Chapter 23

“See yourself in finest mail,” Marmaduke encouraged James a

short while later, then when sweat ran down the young lord’s face and his sword swings and thrusts began to lose aim. “Every inch of you shining brighter than the sun, the hiss of your blade cutting the air,” he added, stepping back, opening his arms wide. “Come for me. Let your sword-craft take over.”

“I am learning sword-craft,” James snarled, and took a wild swing at Marmaduke. “You taunt me.”

“I want you to fight.” Marmaduke blocked the slashes, the ring of steel echoing in the vaulted storeroom. “Women love warriors,” he tossed out, circling the younger man now, forcing him to parry lightning-quick strikes. “Your lass is fiery. She would reward you well. Think how much your prowess would please her. The praise she’d heap on you. Her passion-”

“Enough!” James lunged, his surprisingly strong blow ringing against Marmaduke’s blade, the impact sending a jolt up Marmaduke’s arm. “Lady Rhona-”

“She is the prize.” Marmaduke leapt back and tossed his sword high, catching it by the hilt. He grinned. “That trick, too, I will teach you. But later, after a bit more practice.”

“You are mad.”

“Nay.” Marmaduke shook his head. “I understand the importance of pleasing a lady.

“Now, come,” he finished, again taking up a fighting stance. “Let us continue.”

“Beast,” James muttered, slicing air. Then he leapt forward, sword ready, as he blocked or countered Marmaduke’s tireless thrusts with ever greater skill.

Until low-voiced bickering reached them from the stairwell and Marmaduke backed him against the well house.

“Foolish lad.” Marmaduke cast aside the blunt-tipped practice sword and dragged the back of his hand over his sweat-slicked brow. “You would be dead now were I a true foe.”

Panting, James ignored him, his attention on the shadowy arch of

the stairwell.

The voices neared, still arguing. One a man's deep grumble, the other a woman's.

And she was clearly winning.

"The salt beef is full o' worms," the man grouched, his exasperation echoing off the undercroft's thick walls.

"There must be something," Lady Rhona's voice insisted. "We cannot have a wedding without a marriage feast."

And then the two of them reached the bottom of the steps. Rhona froze, her jaw slipping as she stared at James, surprise on her pretty face. "I thought I heard swords, but when the noise stopped so abruptly, I figured it was just our castle ghosts."

"Ghosts," Eoghann scoffed. "The only wraiths hereabouts – if there are any – would be too weak from hunger to go about clashing swords."

"Then we'll just have to be sure that every table at the wedding feast groans beneath enough hearty fare to fill the bellies of all Dunlaidir's residents." She beamed at the seneschal. "Past and present."

Her words drew a snort from James. "Eoghann's right. We dinnae have ghosts."

"So?" Marmaduke leaned in, lowered his voice. "If the notion pleases the lass, you'd be better served not to laugh."

Rhona came over to them then, the seneschal close on her heels. She smiled at James. "It's good to see you swing a sword again. It's been a while."

"Perhaps I've decided to change that?" he said, pushing away from the wall. In his haste, he stumbled and the practice sword slipped from his hand.

He froze, his gaze going to the blade's blunted tip.

A squire's learning tool, not a man's.

Marmaduke's heart twisted at the young lord's blunder. With lightning speed, he used his foot to flip the sword into his hand. Rhona noting the blade's impotence would only cause James further shame.

And so...

As quickly as he'd seized it, Marmaduke tossed the sword, rounded tip and all, into a dark corner where it landed with a metallic *thwank* on a pile of haphazardly-stacked crossbows.

Hooking his hands in his sword belt, he smiled. "I needed a training partner and your lord offered his time." He slanted a glance at James, daring him to disagree. "We enjoyed a few good practice rounds."

Rhona's eyes lit. "I am glad."

“Lady...” Marmaduke’s tone turned serious. “I appreciate your wish for a lavish wedding feast, and I would surely enjoy one, but from what I have seen of this storeroom, such a plan is best forgotten. A grand celebration is not needed.”

“That’s what I’ve been telling her.” Eoghann swelled his chest. “No victuals, no feast. Simple as that, it is. Lest we serve up braised sea-mist harvested from the curtains of it e’er drifting about here.”

“No shortage of that, indeed.” Marmaduke smiled at the crusty old seneschal. Nodding slowly, he felt a wave of prickles spill over him – the kind of shivers he cherished, the birth of an idea.

The beginnings of a plan.

Glancing about, he noted three sides of salt beef hanging from the ceiling. Ancient-looking, they appeared to be the only source of meat in the vast undercroft.

The only other halfway edible supplies he spotted were a few scrawny seabird carcasses, yet to be plucked and dressed.

“Dunlaidir once had an impressive herd of cattle.” Marmaduke slanted a glance at James. “My liege, Duncan MacKenzie, praised them for days after his last visit here. He swore he’d never enjoyed finer beef.”

“Aye, the best beef to be had within a three-days ride is what most said,” James owned. “Now, with our cattle grazing the fields de la Hogue seized from Sir John, we have scarce enough stores to fill the belly of a mouse.

“It’s a sad truth, but the way of it.” James rested his hip on the edge of the well. “In my father’s time, this holding was a major strength in this part of Scotland,” he went on, seeming to age years. “Then Sir Hugh smashed his iron fist on us, not taking our walls but ravaging our land and lifting our cattle.”

“Terrifies our people, too,” Eoghann added, anger etching hard lines into his craggy face. “Many are afraid to leave their cottages, fearing Sir Hugh and his men will swoop in.”

“He’s a black-hearted snake if e’er there was one,” James agreed.

Only Marmaduke said nothing, his gaze on the creel of oxhides.

At last he knew what must be done.

“You want a lavish marriage feast,” he said to Rhona. “I humbly accept. But,” he added, glancing at Eoghann, “we shall celebrate two wedding feasts.”

Behind him, James made an odd choking sound. “Two?”

“One feast following the nuptials, serving up whatever is on hand,” he explained. “The second a few nights later and enjoyed with the best beef to be had within a three-days ride.”

James’ eyes rounded. “You are full mad.”

“Nay, I am hoping my wedding night will prove a dark and

moonless one,” Marmaduke corrected. “The first feast will be our smokescreen.”

“How so?” That from Eoghann.

Marmaduke clapped a hand on the older man’s shoulder, smiled. “Tis so, my friend...” He paused, took a breath. “The dinner will serve as a ruse, a distraction to allow a few of us to slip onto Sir John’s old lands and retrieve your cattle.”

“I don’t understand.” James frowned.

“I do.” Eoghann grinned. “I can’t believe I didn’t think of it.”

James still looked confused. “What?”

“Don’t you see?” A gleam came into the seneschal’s eyes. “Who would expect a man to launch a cattle raid on his wedding night?”

“Oh.” Comprehension stole across James’ face. “And what about the night of the second wedding feast?”

“That, my friend, remains to be seen,” Marmaduke said, holding his tongue.

He knew exactly what would happen.



SHELLFISH AND SEAWARE.

Food for the poor.

Caterine pushed back her hair, annoyance making her head ache.

Whether it pleased her or nay, such shameful victuals would soon be the mainstay offerings at a marriage feast she’d only this day learned would take place.

Worse, the second celebration presented even more absurdities, but of a wholly different nature.

All manner of distressing thoughts filling her mind, she tossed another handful of wet, dripping sea tangle into one of the dozen or so creels scattered along the narrow shoreline where Dunlaidir’s cliffs met the sea.

She breathed deeply of the cold, salt-laden air, pressed chill-numbed fingers against the small of her back, wishing herself anywhere but here, on the one tiny sliver of beach accessible to the stronghold’s residents.

Reached by a precarious path carved centuries ago into the living stone of the mainland’s cliff-face, the hidden cove’s tidal pools and shallows provided a rich harvesting ground for a variety of seaweed and other gifts of the briny deep.

Welcome sustenance she and the most trusted members of the household had been gathering for hours.

Now, gloaming would soon be upon them, ending a day spent in toil and labor.

And the hatching of secret plans.

Closing her eyes, she turned her face into the cold, blustery wind and wondered at the wisdom of grown men sneaking about disguised as oxen.

A fool notion to her, a brilliant plan to those who meant to act it out.

Especially her champion, who'd sprung the idea on them, claiming the late King Robert Bruce had once used the same trickery – the tossing of oxhides over men's crouched bodies, then using the stealth of darkness to merge with a cattle herd and so near a watching garrison undetected.

Caterine scoffed at the very idea. She'd never heard of Scotland's hero king sneaking anywhere.

And if he had, he'd certainly not done so disguised as a cow.

"There are advantages to this day's smelly chores," a familiar voice whispered in her ear.

"Gah!" Caterine jumped.

"Gah, indeed," Rhona chuckled.

Caterine wheeled about to face her friend. "I know that look on you," she said. "You were collecting limpets from the rock pools on the other side of the cove. What *advantages* drove you over here to startle me out of my wits?"

"You wound me." Rhona whipped a bulging sack of the conical shells from behind her back. "This is the sixth one I've filled. As for the advantages..."

She cast a sidelong glance at the straining muscles of Sir Alec's bared back as he hefted a full creel of glistening dulse onto his shoulder for the climb up the cliff path.

"Come now," Rhona gushed, "have you e'er seen so much glorious male flesh in one place?"

"I do not go about eyeing men, as well you know," Caterine returned.

"Perhaps you should?"

"I think not."

"Hah!" Rhona laughed.

And Caterine found herself turning toward the sea, looking out to where the MacKenzie men and a few of Dunlaidir's best waded through the shallows, their seaweed-filled nets floating behind them.

To a man, they'd discarded their tunics. Some had even removed their hose, opting to brave the cold waters in naught but their braies.

They may well have been naked.

Every last one of them, including the Sassunach champion.

Rhona stepped closer, nudged her. "Well?"

"Aye, they are impressive," Caterine admitted, watching them.

She also noted which man's clinging underhose revealed the largest and heaviest-looking bulge. And the sight of it filled the lowest part of her belly with a warm, pleasing tingle.

Uncomfortable to be so stirred, she sent a glance down the beach to where an equally shirtless James worked a rock pool. "Think you James would approve of your ogling?"

Rhona smiled. "There is no harm in looking. I suspect James Keith would lose all interest in me if he thought I couldn't appreciate a man's well-fleshed pleasure tools. Especially when they're displayed so-

"Pleasure tools?" Catherine almost choked on the term.

"Of course." Rhona's eyes twinkled. "That's how I think of them, but there are other ways of calling them. Shall I-"

"Nae. How can you even think of such foolery when you know why we are here?" Catherine glanced again at the men with the nets.

No better than her friend, her attention sought and rested where it shouldn't.

There was something irresistibly arousing about the way the thin cloth of the men's braies hugged that part of them. The wet linen molded itself so perfectly to their flesh, not just the length of their shafts and the swell of their buttocks could be seen but also the thick hair sheltering their maleness.

At once, a weighty tension began pulsing deep in her belly, becoming even more insistent when her gaze settled on the thus-displayed male-parts of the man who raged heads above the others: her champion's.

"He would pleasure you well, my lady," her friend declared, low-voiced.

"I do not want to be pleased," Catherine denied, appalled by how stale the statement tasted.

How untrue.

At the moment, at least, her entire body ached to know pleasure.

"You should." Rhona dropped her bag of limpets onto a growing pile of limpet-filled sacks. "I take my pleasure where and when I can find it," she said, then strode down the beach toward James and the waiting rock pool.

Even then, she was ruled by her passions.

Unbidden, Sir Marmaduke's description of his first wife popped into Catherine's mind.

Taunted her, truth be told.

Indeed, her chest tightened with a disquieting sensation she couldn't name. She did know that, like Arabella, Rhona was a woman of passion. One who lived for, and thrilled, to carnal desire.

She did not.

Not that she didn't know what passion was – she did.

Especially since *his* arrival.

She'd just never reached out and seized it.

But maybe she should.

Her decision made, she scooped up another dripping handful of sea tangle and dropped it into the waiting creel. She'd buried two husbands – the first dying of cold English steel when he was but a few years older than James is now. The second died of old age – and she wasn't getting any younger.

No one would fault her if she took advantage of her attraction to the Sassunach, let him teach her what it meant to be a woman ruled by passion.

So long as she kept her heart out of such intimate explorations, she wouldn't fault herself either.

Chapter 24

Many hours later, in the most silent depths of the night, Catherine

slipped from her bed and into the ante-room. Her champion hadn't yet sought the rough pallet he'd made for himself on the tiny chamber's cold, rush-strewn floor, and the saints knew where he held himself.

She suspected he walked the ramparts.

Or perhaps he'd found pleasure in the arms of a fetching kitchen maid? A hot-blooded lass eager to air her skirts for one of his dimpled smiles and few fair words.

More bothered by that possibility than she cared to admit, she frowned at the pallet. Lumpy and straw-filled, it loomed empty but held the imprint of his brow as surely as if he sprawled on it in all his well-hewn glory.

Not wanting to think about him, she left the ante-room only to discover that, somehow, his presence commanded the whole of her quarters.

Not just the small portion he'd claimed for his own.

She couldn't even take refuge in her own great four-poster bed for every time she slipped into its curtained confines, rather than sleeping, she tossed and turned, her mind drifting to him.

Which was why she'd fled her bed's cold depths in the first place. And dared to do so as bare-bottomed as she slept.

Surprised by her boldness, heat swept up her neck even as the fresh night wind poured through the opened shutters. Merciful saints, she'd risked having him awaken and see her hovering unclothed in the ante-room, and that was worrisome.

Wondering what ailed her, annoyed because she suspected she knew, she snatched her chemise off the chest at the foot of her bed, and yanked it over her head. Not that its thin linen could shield her from the anticipation rippling through her.

Sensations put there by the damning knowledge that, soon, she would stand naked before him. And the truth was, despite the reservations of her heart, her woman's body, so long starved of affection, would joy in his attentions.

Revel in having him tend an ache she no longer cared to deny.

Her senses reeling, she considered crossing the room to watch the remainder of the night drift by from one of the his-and-her seats carved into the sides of the chamber's largest window embrasure. But she couldn't seem to move, her gaze seemingly latched on the strongbox.

The iron-bound chest drew her, freezing her in place, its pull irresistible.

Calling to her.

Or rather, the cloth-covered clump of granite inside the chest, beckoned.

The Laird's Stone.

Her blood pounding in her ears, she stared at the innocent-looking strongbox. Legend claimed the Laird's Stone measured a man's prowess and chivalric courage when recognizing a new Master of Dunlaidir. So shouldn't the Sassunach's bold claiming of her quarters, the sheer power of his stalwart self, influence the stone's allegiance?

Cause it to weep?

If indeed it could.

Before she could stop herself, she dropped to her knees, fumbled with the cold iron of the lock, and raised the chest's lid.

Not that she believed the tales.

But on the wee chance the legend did have some truth, the stone's tears would mean Sir Marmaduke would remain at Dunlaidir as its master, his valor and strength assuring the good of them all, his virility as her soon-to-be-husband slaking the burgeoning needs he'd awakened in her.

Carnal desires she could indulge without regret.

So she glanced at the door, and strained her ears for approaching footsteps, but the only sound she caught was the crackle of the hearth fire and the dull thudding of her own heart.

Dunlaidir was silent, its stout walls and those within, at peace.

Even Leo slept. The little dog lay curled on his bed, as unaware of her turmoil as the cold and dark night outside her windows.

Caterine released a long breath.

No one would witness her folly.

Glad of it, she gathered her courage and lifted the Laird's Stone from the strongbox.

Ignoring the little voices that called her a fool, she pushed to her feet and carried the heavy wooden bowl to the nearest cresset lamp. Caught in the night breeze, the bronze lamp swayed on its chain, but its flame burned true, and cast a healthy enough glow for her to examine the stone.

If she dared.

"Oh, by all the ancients," she muttered, angry at herself for hauling

out the fool piece of granite, angrier still at her hesitancy to peer at it.

“Och, come,” she scolded herself.

Then, with enough passion in her blood to make the boldest heart proud, she stiffened her spine and yanked the cloth off the stone.

It was dry.

Nary a droplet of moisture glistened on its quartz-speckled surface or misted the smooth grain of its wooden bowl.

Stunned by the punch of her disappointment, she stared at the much-revered Laird’s Stone, and wanted to weep herself.

For being a fool.

And most especially, for imagining, even for a moment, that a cold lump of stone might cry.



AT THE SAME SMALL HOUR, but two levels lower, the cold stone walls of the Keith family chapel offered an excellent trysting place for Sir Marmaduke and a few select men.

His own.

The four MacKenzie Highlanders of Kintail.

Also present was Dunlaidir’s aging Father Tomas, included out of necessity and respect.

The men huddled together near the rood screen, each one aware of the gathering’s furtive nature. For that reason, they spoke in low tones, quietly ignoring the bone-deep cold seeping through the soles of their shoes and chilling the tops of their ears.

Resisting an urge to stamp his feet against the bite of the frigid air, Marmaduke rubbed his hands together and stared up at the wheel-shaped *Corona lucis* suspended high above their heads, his gaze drawn by its score of burning tapers.

The fine wax candles cast weird shadows on the men’s earnest faces and sent shifting patterns of pale light weaving across the chapel’s mural-painted walls.

Nothing else moved in the stillness, an eerie, otherworldly atmosphere thick with the heavy weight of age and the cloying scents of dust, old stone, and stale incense.

“I beg you to reconsider, my lord,” Father Tomas addressed Marmaduke. “The danger is too great,” he added, wringing his hands. “I will pray, but Sir Hugh is cunning.”

“It is because de la Hogue will know our every move that I would take such a risk,” Marmaduke said, knowing nothing he said would soothe the worried priest.

The aged holy man hadn’t stopped fretting since Marmaduke declared his intentions to marry in the village church rather than

within the safety of Dunlaidir's curtain walls.

Worse, that he planned to do so with every able-bodied man within Keith territory in attendance, and armed with the surplus mail and weapons now gathering dust in the stronghold's undercroft.

"My friends, nothing is so certain as that Sir Hugh will make some move the day of the wedding." He glanced at the hand-wringing priest. "Father Tomas tells us the man has vowed to be present. Whether he is or nay, there is no doubt his men will slip into the crowd."

"Then why provoke a stir by using the village kirk?"

All eyes turned on Sir Lachlan, his question hanging in the incense-laden air. "I'm with Father Tomas," he said, nodding to the priest. Still a bit pale from his wounding, the young knight leaned against a stone pillar. "I cannae see the sense of it."

Sir Alec snorted. "If you had more experience at warfare, you'd know why."

"I'm no' a bairn," Lachlan tossed back, the knuckles of his fisted hands gleaming in the candlelight. "I've seen my share of battle."

"Highland skirmishes." Sir Ross chuckled, a good-natured wink taking the sting out of his quip.

"Ah, well, as I mind it," Alec hurtled on, "a village wedding will lead those miscreants right into our hands, which is exactly where we want them. One false move, and they're raven fodder."

The other men nodded agreement.

Only Father Tomas appeared uncertain.

"Here is the way of it." Sir Gowan snatched a tall brass candlestick off a side altar and raised its wax taper before his bearded face. "All we need is one," he said, glancing at Lachlan. "We'll loosen the varlet's tongue with a bit o' Highland persuasion until he spills who in this household is de la Hogue's man."

"Have a care lest you set yourself afire." Marmaduke took the flaming taper from Gowan and returned it to the side altar. "We'll need every man we can muster."

He gave the gruff Highlander a pointed look. "Including you."

Father Tomas lifted his hands, his nervous gaze flitting from man to man. "You believe Sir Hugh will launch a full-fledged attack?"

"Scarce that," Marmaduke sought to ease the graybeard's concern. "Sending a mounted host to fall upon a wedding party is too bold a measure even for a scoundrel of Sir Hugh's ilk."

"That's no' wha-"

Marmaduke silenced Lachlan with a look.

"I knew de la Hogue passing well at the English court," he went on, speaking to the priest, but keeping an eye on Lachlan. "He executes his villainy with stealth and intrigue, and shuns the danger

and honor of pitched battle.

“He will not change his ways now.” Walking over to the free-standing baptismal basin half-hidden in a murk-filled corner near the chapel door, Marmaduke trailed his fingers over the cold stone of the intricately carved font cover and silently prayed the old priest would swallow the half-truth.

Few knew better than he of the treachery one such as de la Hogue could unleash onto innocents. The dastard’s dark deeds were known the length and breadth of England.

Which was why he wanted the villagers armed.

And why he deemed that particular risk the lesser of two evils.

“You said his spittle could burn holes in the ground, so why – *ooph!*”

Marmaduke whirled around in time to see Alec jab two fingers into the small of Lachlan’s back. Drawing an exasperated breath of the chapel’s fusty air, Marmaduke clasped his hands behind his own back and returned to the others.

“Sir Priest,” he began, “you claim the villagers are frightened but not disloyal. Will they stand against Sir Hugh if properly armed and guaranteed our protection, even refuge within these walls, if they choose to seek it?”

“Ehhh...” For a long moment, Father Tomas looked as if he expected to be dragged off to his doom, but then he nodded. “Aye, they would,” he said. “I am certain every able-bodied lad and man would fight. They are sore tired of Sir Hugh’s tyranny.”

“Then so be it,” Sir Marmaduke declared.

Alec frowned. “We are to supply villagers with armor and weapons?”

“Nay,” Marmaduke said, “we win their trust and rebuild their confidence. By doing so, we strengthen this holding.”

“And if they turn those weapons on us?” That from a dubious-sounding Gowan.

Marmaduke set his hands on his hips and simply stared back at the bearded Highland knight.

The look on his face said enough.

“We’d still be outnumbered,” Gowan persisted.

Marmaduke just shook his head.

“Aye, well.” Gowan hitched up his sword belt, brushed at his sleeve. “I’ll no’ be arguing with you.”

The others grumbled and exchanged looks, but no one voiced a further complaint.

Not directly, anyway.

And that was enough.

Satisfied, Marmaduke relaxed his shoulders, let some of the tension

ease out of him. "The wedding is but a few days away," he said, turning to Father Tomas. "You, Sir Priest, shall inform the villagers they will receive mailed shirts and whatever surplus weaponry we can spare.

"The day of nuptials," he went on, "they are to crowd the roads and church, but disguise the hauberks beneath their normal wear and hide any weapons as much as is possible."

Alec muttered beneath his breath, earning an elbow in the ribs from Ross.

"Have done, all of you." Marmaduke eyed them, then turned to the holy man. "Regarding my lady's people," he began, "assure them Dunlaidir is once again in strong hands and shall remain so. Once Sir Hugh has been dealt with, repairs to their homes and fields will be seen to without hesitation."

Gowan snorted. "Outfitting farmers with steel, tending their fields-"

"Father," Marmaduke cut in, "you will give them these assurances on my knightly word. Let it be known any villager yet fearful may seek shelter within these walls until they feel safe enough to return to their homes."

"Braw words, English," Sir Ross said, and sounded so much like Duncan MacKenzie, Marmaduke almost whipped about to see if that great lout stood behind him.

He did smile, but bittersweet, for, of a sudden, he felt a powerful urge to see his old friend.

A burning desire to be home again.

Home at Balkenzie.

And to be there with his new bride beside him.

Blinking against the unexpected emotion stinging his good eye, he threw back his shoulders and faced his men.

"Hear me well, friends, for I won't say this again. You will deliver the hauberks and arms," he said, appalled by the thickness still swelling his throat. "For secrecy, you'll work nights, preferably between the fall of darkness and first light, hiding the gear in a secure place until Father Tomas has met with the villagers."

"And when do we begin this noble undertaking?" Gowan again.

Some inner devil, but not his usual ones, made Marmaduke glance the chapel's tall lancet windows. Narrow and pointy-topped, they aimed at the heavens, even as blackest night pressed against them, stealing the color from their multi-hued panes, and cloaking the world beyond in shielding darkness.

A perfect night for stealth.

Alec followed his gaze. "Nay, Strongbow, you cannae mean this night?"

Marmaduke almost chuckled at the stricken look on the other man's face. Instead, he gave him a friendly clap on the arm. "You are more quick-witted than I'd thought."

His tone almost jovial, he added, "I shall reward the lot of you a thousandfold and then some when we return home."

Rolling eyes and grumbles met his offer, but one by one, his men took their leave and he knew they'd have much accomplished before the sun cleared the horizon.

"God go with you," the old priest murmured into their wake, not quite able to keep the catch out of his voice. When their footsteps faded, he turned grateful eyes on Marmaduke.

"You are a good man," he said. "Our people will not fail you."

"Nor shall I fail them, that I promise you." Marmaduke reached for Father Tomas' hand and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

Then he, too, left the chapel. But unlike his men who'd descended into Dunlaidir's bowels, he climbed a winding turret stair to his lady's chamber, a wry smile lifting the corners of his mouth.

A good man, the priest had called him.

Not this night.

Nay, far from it.

This night, he intended to be bad.

Very bad, indeed.

Chapter 25

To Marmaduke's great annoyance, the only eyes to greet him from the shadowy recess of his lady's bed proved round and accusatory. Definitely not the sapphire ones he'd hoped to find, their blue depths heavy-lidded and drowsed with sleep.

Nor did the low rumbles coming from deep in Leo's chest ring anywhere near as sweet as the soft gasp of surprise he'd expected to hear upon easing back the bed curtains.

Soon, very soon, though, she'd enchant him with sated sighs.

Of that, he'd make certain.

But first he had to find her, and preferably without the aid of her wee shadow.

"My apologies, little man, but I do not wish your unswerving regard while I seek to win your lady's favor." Leaning forward, he returned Leo's bristly glare with a glower of his own.

"If you are wise, you will go back to sleep and dream of four-legged bits of fluff and leave your fair mistress to me," he added, closing the bed curtains on the tiny creature's bared teeth and snarls.

The glare or his advice must've worked, for thick silence issued from behind the drawn curtains. Well, quiet and the muffled rustlings of the wee beastie making himself comfortable again.

Satisfied, Marmaduke turned his back on the bed and his soon-to-be-slumbering nemesis.

At last...

Nothing but the chill night air stood between him and his first true attempt to introduce his bride-to-be to the mysteries and enchantment of the love he hoped to share with her.

Even his demons had been routed for the night, soundly banished by his strong desire not to let anything stop him from winning at least one sweet sigh of pleasure from his lady's tender lips.

His vision now accustomed to the dimness of the sparsely lit chamber, he searched the shadows and quickly found her, her refuge in the window embrasure revealed when the hiss and crackle of the nearby cresset lamp's guttering wicks drew his attention.

The bronze lamp swung on its chain, its sputtering flames casting

odd patterns onto the walls of the little alcove. She huddled on the cushioned seat, a furred skin tucked around her legs, her *arisaid* gathered loosely about her shoulders, the whole of her bathed in the silver glow of a crescent moon.

She faced the night-darkened sea, her back conveniently turned his way – the same back she'd favored several times during their toil in the cove earlier that day.

A back he knew must still ache from exertion.

The excuse he needed to touch her.

His smile returned, this time with a decidedly wicked slant.

Drawn by a powerful urge to put all the years of empty nights behind him – and slay a few of her dragons as well – he crossed the rushes until he stood a scant heartbeat behind her.

Scarce daring to breathe, so loudly did his blood pound with need, it took him a moment to recognize the roar in his ears not as his own, but as the muted thunder coming through the opened window – the rhythmic crash of waves breaking against the rocks far below.

Trying not to even think of rejection, he flexed his fingers and heaved a deep breath to strengthen the hope in his heart.

Then, feeling much the benighted heathen out to achieve his goals by any means, fair or foul, he placed his hands on her shoulders.

He kneaded the tension there, much affected by the moonlit wonder of her, distracted by the warm silk of her braids brushing against the backs of his fingers.

"My lady," he said, his voice roughened. "Does this please you?"

"Aye," she said, stirring. Then she gifted him with the soft sigh he'd hoped for as he'd made the winding climb to her chamber. She delighted him further by twisting around to give him a sleepy smile.

"Thank you," she said, and lifted her braids out of the way, leaving his fingers aching to reclaim them, then surprising him even more by shrugging her *arisaid* off her shoulders. "I am a bit sore."

"You worked hard this day," he returned, wondering if she'd been aware of his presence in the room.

If she'd perhaps caught his whispered words to Leo?

He didn't know. But he did see her shift on the bench's cushioned seat. She angled her back toward him, and then bent her head forward to free more of her neck and shoulders to the hopefully-soothing strokes of his massaging fingers.

"You are surprised I seek your touch." The softly spoken words were a statement.

"I am, my lady."

She drew a long breath, releasing it slowly. "Indeed, your hands work wonders. I am enjoying this."

Another of her frankly stated truths.

But one that streaked right through him to land squarely in his groin.

"I am pleased," he managed, opting to be as forthright, amazed he could speak, so fierce was the heated tightening in his loins.

So great the swelling of his heart.

"I knew your back-" He broke off, catching his mistake.

'Twas her shoulders he kneaded through the soft linen of her chemise, not her back. Yet, some weird magic lying thick in the silver-kissed air made him half-believe even thinking his wishes this night might see them granted.

He wanted to touch more than her shoulders. He wished...

Hell, he burned for her to ask him to glide his hands lower, to massage her aching back as well. Trouble was, the raging need straining thick and hard against his hose couldn't withstand such a temptation.

His once-praised stamina, defeated by the supple curve of a single chemise-encased back.

"Truly, sir..." she began, then paused as the most delicate shiver rippled through her. "My back aches more than my shoulders. It is there your hands would best serve me."

"Lady, that isn't-"

"Proper?"

Marmaduke frowned, sure she was smiling. Perhaps stifling a laugh. For sure, he wasn't about to lean down and round to peer at her face to see.

There comes a time ladies tire of proper, he thought he heard her say.

Before he could decide, she reached up to circle her hands around his wrists and lift them from her shoulders. In that moment, he knew what she was going to do.

Heart thumping, he squared his own shoulders against the challenge he was about to face, stared past her out the tall, arch-topped windows, and waited.

Far out to sea, high above the horizon, a horned moon sailed from behind a cloud, its wan light spilling little more than a thin thread of silver across the night-blackened waters, but somehow managing to illuminate each unveiled inch of creamy skin she revealed to him.

And, thanks to the advantage of his great height, that blissful view included the lush rounds of her breasts.

"Saints, Maria, and Joseph," he fair snarled, borrowing Duncan MacKenzie's favorite oath, past caring if she knew she'd set him on his ear by peeling down her undergown clear to her waist.

"I've surprised you again." She looked up at him over her bared shoulder, her blue gaze guileless, her full breasts, moon-washed and glorious.

Aching to be caressed.

Her hardened nipples demanded to be attended in ways that would make the devil beg forgiveness.

"You are talented in that, it would seem." Marmaduke winced at the stilted sound of his voice. A eunuch could have addressed her more smoothly.

Frowning, he tried again. "Are you not cold?"

"No." She didn't blink. "Are you?"

Nay, I am afire with wanting you, he almost tossed back at her.

"Fair lady, I am anything but cold as I believe you know," he said aloud, matching his words to the directness she favored. "But I am puzzled."

"Oh?"

"Aye." Marmaduke would've sworn he caught a flare of disappointment flash across her face.

"I only want you to massage the knots from my back." She turned her face to the sea again. "It will feel better without my chemise in the way."

"Indeed." Marmaduke narrowed his good eye at the back of her fair head, his desire to woo her, to win her love and ignite her passion with careful and leisurely deliberation, at war with the beast she'd unleashed with her boldness.

"Bare flesh is more sensitive," she said then, her gaze still on the dark night beyond the tower windows. "'Tis an ancient truth."

"You are full blunt," he said, his voice tight with the cost of his restraint.

"I told you, I am a woman of plain words," she reminded him. "I am also practical."

"So I believe."

"Life has taught me so," she returned, and leaned forward, no doubt aware that a swath of moonglow spread slowly down the length of her naked spine.

"Please," she urged, the softness of her voice near as bewitching as the satiny skin awaiting his attentions. "My back aches and your touch is soothing."

He swallowed.

His hands obliged her.

Smoothing, stroking, kneading.

Spending her every ounce of pleasure his roving fingers could supply, and driving himself to the brink of madness.

"Think you I can do this and not desire to caress the breasts you've bared as well?" A certain unruly part of him borrowed his tongue. "Be warned, lovely, I am not a beardless youth to be teased and-"

"Nor do I wish to provoke you. We are soon to wed, are we not? I

do not mind if you touch me," she said, and his manhood strained again.

He stood silent, unable to speak.

Or move.

His hands stilled on the small of her back, his entire body tighter than a full score of tautly drawn Welsh bowstrings.

"I am coming to know you." She twisted her head around and peered up at him. "You want to know why I do not mind.

"The reason," she went on, her sapphire gaze as earnest as her tone, "is because it felt good when gazed you upon me just now. My breasts, of course."

"Guidsakes," Marmaduke borrowed another word from his MacKenzie clansmen.

"The moment was pleasurable," she added, making things worse.

"I see." He did, and the knowledge saw him swelling to such a painful degree he almost embarrassed himself.

A lesser man would have.

"You enjoy suchlike?" He could scarce push the words past the dryness in his throat.

"Perhaps? I do not know. With you, it would seem." She looked at him, her face shadow-cast in the moonlight. "I have not known much physical pleasure. I would like to address that deficiency," she said, the words coming out in a rush.

As if, despite her boldness, she sought to have done with them before they could damn her.

"You understand what you are saying, my lady?"

"Of course."

"I must be certain."

"You may be. I always speak plain."

"So it would seem."

She smiled. "So it is."

"Well, then..." Marmaduke rubbed his hands together, warming them. Then, encouraged by her consent, her surprising and delightful eagerness, he let his fingers roam again, but kneading less and caressing more. Sweeping in ever more intimate circles up and down her back, itching to slip round her ribcage and brush against the side swells of those lush and creamy breasts.

Above all, he ached to glide his fingers lower, dip beneath the bunched folds of her undergown and explore the sweetness he knew awaited him betwixt her thighs.

He pushed the thought aside, fought against the growing tightness in his chest, a discomfort spreading all through him. And that was a shame, for he needed every breath to form the question searing the tip of his tongue...

“So, my lady...” he began, looking down at her bowed head, her night-bared shoulders and back. “Shall I speak as baldly?”

“That is my wish, aye.”

“As it pleases you, then.”

“Good.”

And it would be. He'd make certain of it. If he didn't awaken to find himself sprawled across his pallet, her persuasive words spinning away, figments of a dream.

But he wasn't asleep.

And she was definitely curled before him on the window bench, her sweet body only half-clothed, her acceptance of him, her eagerness for his touch, as real as the bedchamber around them, the vast, moon-lit sea stretching away to the horizon.

“You may say anything to me,” she said then, her voice soft, carrying a slight hitch. “Whatever comes to you.”

Marmaduke's heart thumped, her word choice sending a jolt of heat to his loins.

“Well, then, sweeting,” he said, wondering if she could hear the rushing of his blood. “You wish to know pleasure?” The words came low, but seemed to hover between them, and not even the night wind could sweep away their portent.

As if she knew, she scooted around to face him. Moonlight bathed her, including her magnificent breasts, still wondrously bare. She met his gaze, her own serene, as calm as if she'd merely nodded in casual greeting.

“Aye, my lord, I wish to experience such things,” she said, the admission – and the view – turning him to molten fire. “Desire, as Lady Rhona once told me, is something my life has lacked. She said I am sorely in need of passion.”

“She told you that?”

“She did.” She nodded and the movement caused her breasts to sway. “She suggested as much the day she told me I'd best send for a champion.”

“And you did.”

“Nae, she did.”

“And now you have one.”

She smiled. “Aye. A champion, a soon-to-be husband, a man.”

A besotted fool, Marmaduke added silently.

“That is the way of it.” Her gaze slid over him. “I have decided I am as much in need of the third as the first two,” she said, leaning back on her hands so her breasts lifted slightly upward, their chill-tightened tips thrusting right at him.

Just as unsettling, her eyes gleamed bold as Bathsheba's. “For good or ill, I am not a shy woman,” she explained, taking his hands, lacing

her fingers with his.

"My body has been seen and ... *used* ... by too many to hide behind false modesty. Now, before I become a withered crone, I find I would enjoy exploring the fleshly delights kitchen maids and laundresses sing of when they think all ladies have left the hall."

"Lady, you are as far from a crone as summer from the coldest winter," he said as she guided his hands toward her breasts, holding them mere inches from her lush, creamy skin.

So close, he could feel the heat streaming out from her.

"Will you spend me such pleasure, then?"

Marmaduke scarce heard her, so thick was the haze of his arousal, so achingly sweet, the powerful verging of his need.

"Sweeting..." He looked at her. "What did you say? I didn't."

"I asked for pleasure," she said, the vulnerability in her eyes piercing his heart. "Will you indulge me? Can you do so knowing I wish to keep all emotion out of any physical intimacies we share?"

That he heard.

But any protest died in his throat, overrun by a moan when she brought his hands even closer to her breasts. Clearly mistaking the pitiful sound for his agreement, she touched his fingers to her flesh.

"*Caterine*," her name burst past his lips the instant his passion broke.

"Then you agree?" Her voice cut through the fog swirling around him.

He nodded, unable to deny her aught in that moment.

Even such a fool proposal as she'd just suggested.

One he had no intention of keeping.

But now, this moment, he had greater concerns on his troubled mind. Such as how to keep her from noticing the telltale stain dampening his hose and the front flap of his tunic.

For he, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow, champion of fair ladies and slayer of dragons, had just joined the ranks of lesser men.

Chapter 26

Enchanter of women.

A charmer of untold skill and finesse.

Capable of seducing the virtue from a self-sacrificing virgin saint, or so his men claimed.

Caterine puzzled, his men's boasts echoing in her ears. If they spoke true, why had he pulled his hands from her grasp - away from her bared breasts - and dropped to his knees on the rush-strewn floor? Kneeling before her, his head bowed, he looked anything but a man so famed in the fine art of winning female hearts.

In anything, he appeared defeated.

Worse, he struck her as pained.

Not sure what to say, she worried the folds of the *arisaid* bunched on her lap. She sought the wrap's comfort even as she willed her champion to raise his head and look at her.

To touch her again.

Mercy.

She should be scandalized, shocked to the bone by such wicked, wanton wishes.

Yet...

He'd stirred something inside her, and now she only wanted him to rekindle that flame. Again give her the pleasure that spun through her the instant his hands had touched her.

Had he drawn back because he found her brazen?

The notion curled talons of mortification around her pride, cruelly dashing every last remnant of the exhilarating tremors called to life by his caress. Tingle by tingle, they fizzled into a congealed pool of cold doubt somewhere in the pit of her belly.

She stared at him now, one half of her admiring the way his hair gleamed in the moonlight, the other half cringing when her gaze fell on his tightly clenched hands.

He was clearly unhappy.

And so the weight of her daring heavy on her shoulders. That she'd joyed in such wantonness, troubled her even more. Still, she'd only reached for the wonder Rhona urged her to seize. Womanly needs, her

friend called such matters. The warmth and heady desire roused by a man's attentions.

And this man...

Well, he was as good as bound to her, so...

Steeling her spine, she drew back her shoulders against her shame and lifted her chin. He'd not been shy about her seeing his nakedness. Far from it, he'd stood calmly before her, fully unclothed beside the bathing tub the morning he'd repaired the latrine chute.

And she he knew she'd studied him.

He'd been full aware of her measuring gaze. If anything, a flash of pride had shown on his face. So why shouldn't she revel in the thrill of having him admire her in such a way?

Because she was a woman, a highborn lady, her mind and years of duty reminded her.

Too bad, her rebellious ears chose that moment to hear Rhona's loud, throaty laughter. Almost as if her friend stood before her, hands on her hips, as she shook her head, warning that fires of passion were a woman's due.

Caterine wasn't sure she agreed about the *due* part.

She did know that Rhona was a woman all herself, so different and untethered compared to other ladies. She also spoke true, for even now, just recalling her words, Caterine felt a fierce urge to heed her friend's advice, to push past her usual restraint.

Could she?

She didn't know and already her stomach was knotting at the madness taking possession of her. But she drew a strengthening breath and then stretched her hand across the cold air between them to slide her fingers through his hair.

"Have I shocked you, my lord?" She put her fear to words, the soft whisper scarce louder than a sigh. "Has my wickedness offended you?"

"*Wicked?*" His head snapped up, the muscle working in his jaw warning she'd done that and more.

"God's bones," he swore. "Is that what you think?"

"I..." she began, but her courage wavered.

"Come now, speak." His voice held nary a hint of censure, but agitation stood etched in every line of his face, and that said everything, as did the tense set of his broad shoulders.

Caterine clutched her hands before her, her fingers still somehow feeling the smooth thickness of his hair. "I do not know what to say, my lord."

"I believe you do," he said, watching her with that all-seeing intensity of his. "I would hear the truth. Whatever it is that troubles you."

"I am not troubled."

"I say you are, and I would know why."

Caterine knit her fingers, felt the hammering of her heart as nerves and fear beat through her.

He lifted a brow. "Well?"

"If you truly want to know, you look as if you've not only taken ill, but also as if you've just been informed you were to be denied all the holy sacraments."

His brow lowered, but a corner of his mouth twitched. "I look ill?"

She nodded. "Aye, doomed everlasting," she told him. "As if you'd died."

"Some do call it the *little death*," she thought she heard him murmur.

"And now?" That, she knew she heard.

He leaned forward. So close his warmth teased her still-naked breasts. "How do I look now, my lady?"

Like you want to devour me, her body cried, responding as his pained expression ebbed into one of concentrated passion. The all-consuming, smoldering kind she only knew from long-ago dreams.

"You look intrigued," she said, choosing a safer reply.

She wasn't about to admit he looked as if he might lean just a few inches closer and rain wondrous kisses all over her, a notion that kindled a spooling, languid warmth inside her.

"Intrigued?" He angled his head, considering. "I would say pleased, for your boldness is a joyous gift."

"A gift?"

"Aye, and a far more precious one than you know," he told her, a new huskiness in his voice. "Dear as a king's ransom."

A fiercely intent look settled on his face then, and he touched the ruby of his signet ring first to the top swell of one of her breasts, then the other, leaving it there. "A gift I shall return to you many times over, my love."

"Oh." Caterine's eyes widened at the endearment, but the gemstone's cold surface pressed so firmly against her breast's sensitized flesh, proved too arousing for her say more.

She opened her mouth to try, but before she could, he pushed to his feet and closed the shutters, blocking out the chill wind but also the lovely magic of the silver-washed night.

Turning back to her, he swept her into his arms, cradling her, the crumpled *arisaid*, and even the furred bed cover, high against the hard wall of his chest.

"Fore God, lady, there is much I would give you and I'd like to speak to you about some of those gifts now, but first I would know you warm," he said. "Your teeth are chattering."

And if he'd had to endure the bounty of her naked breasts winking at him in the moonlight another instant without taking her, truly having her, his ballocks would've drawn so tight he might well have maimed himself for life.

So he contented himself by whispering a single kiss against her temple, then strode across the darkened bedchamber, not releasing her until he reached the circle of warmth still cast by the dying embers in the hearth.

"Don't move," he said, sliding her down the length of him, just for the pure enjoyment of doing so.

"I wouldn't think of it," she returned, her voice soft, perhaps even sounding a bit smitten.

Marmaduke smiled, his soul warming. "There is much I would do for you, lady. And much I would spare you, though this night I would speak only of the gifts I mean to give you."

She only gazed at the embers, so he lowered himself on one knee before the hearth and tossed a few clumps of peat onto the grate. He used an iron poker to jab at the fire until new flames, smoky and sweet, began to take the edge of the room's chill.

"That should do us," he said, satisfied. Straightening, he dusted his hands and then left her to fetch his fur-lined cloak from the ante-room. The newly-stoked fire crackled happily by the time he returned, as did a new blaze sparking in her eyes.

"Thank you." She clutched the furred bed coverlet tightly about her as she looked at him, saying no more.

Silence that hinted something bothered her.

"You are troubled, my lady?"

"Not at all," she said, looking anything but. "I just need to make clear that I do not need or want gifts. You said you intend to shower me with them, and I'd rather you did not."

"I see." He didn't, but tamped down a frown. "Will you tell me why?"

"Of course." She stood straighter, so proud and beautiful. "As we've discussed, I shall enjoy exploring fleshly pleasures with you. Carnal encounters belong to the marital pact." She paused, drew a long breath. "Further, as I am widowed, I see no reason for coyness or denial now, during these few days leading up to our nuptial blessing. We are already committed.

"Even so..." she went on, her tone cooling a bit, "accepting any other form of gift implies an intimacy I cannot give you."

"Understood." Marmaduke nodded once, not telling her that he would do everything in his power to change her mind.

Some things were better left unsaid.

Others were evident despite spoken words. Such as the slight

quaver in her voice as she'd made her proclamation – uncertainty enough to give him the nudge to calmly drape his cloak, fur side up, over a heavy oaken chair near the hearth.

That done, he settled himself into its sturdy embrace as casually as he could, then stretched out his long legs and crossed them at the ankles. “Then come, my lady, and let me at least warm you,” he said, opening his arms. “I would tell you of my home in Kintail, of Balkenzie.”

“This can be your home.” She took a step toward him. “Dunlaidir is a fine stronghold.”

“So it is,” he agreed, giving her one of his special smiles.

The one he'd needed years of painstaking practice to master.

To learn to form around his scar.

Now, he upped the smile's potency by letting a devilishly careless gleam enter his good eye. A casualness at odds with the tense pounding of his heart.

He meant to do so much more than tell her of Balkenzie.

He hoped to make her want to live there.

For her to love him, and his home.

To greet each new day there with gladness and gratitude, as he did. Above all, for the two of them, and the children they'd have, to enjoy the best life he could give them.

“Come,” he tried again, extending his hand. “We shall speak of naught more intimate than the thickness of Balkenzie's walls, its proud location on the southernmost loch-shore of MacKenzie territory, or how pleased I am to have many of its windows fitted with panes of polished horn.”

She stood as straight as if she'd swallowed a pike, the fluttering pulse at the base of her neck revealing that he'd chosen the wrong words to convince her.

“I do not want to hear of this distant castle,” she said, coming closer, placing her hand in his. “I wish you to remain at Dunlaidir. You are needed here, as am I.”

“Not so, fair lady.”

“Nae?”

Marmaduke's brow furrowed. “So I said.”

He wished he could lie.

Instead, he heaved a sigh and drew her onto his lap. “My use here is but for a brief span of time,” he said, settling her so her back rested against his chest, then smoothing the ends of his fur-lined cloak across her legs. “Your purpose here is long expired and does more ill than good.”

“Nonsense.” She twisted round to frown at him, the movement causing the cloak to slip off her shoulders. “I am lady here.”

"You *were* lady here," he reminded her, and tried not to notice the cloak had dipped low enough to expose the top halves of her breasts.

"God's eyes," he muttered, drawing up the cloak so that it once more concealed her lushness. "As I was saying," he began again, this time cradling her head against his shoulder so she couldn't shoot blue fire at him, "you were lady here."

She stiffened. "Meaning?"

"If you remain here, you will be as a shadow on the turret stairs. A presence at the high table even when you are not physically there," he tried to explain. "Your strength will hover behind and over James, shadowing all he says or does so long as you reside within these walls."

"You're only trying to lure me away," she argued.

"I want what is best for you." He spoke the truth as he saw it. "You, and your stepson."

"And what you want for yourself."

"Aye, what I wish for myself as well," he admitted, moving his fingers over hers to rub the chill from them. "Mind you well, fair one, in every man's beginning is his end and many times we reach it far too soon."

He paused to kiss her brow. "Too often, those we'd hoped would make the journey with us, are stricken along the way or take another road, leaving us alone."

"What does that have to do with me? With any of this?" she asked in small voice that said she already knew.

"I have many empty years behind me, lonely years," he told her, each word costing him in its naked honesty. "Now I've the rest of the journey ahead of me, a proud stronghold awaiting my return, and, aye, a heart that yearns to love again."

"You speak like a warrior poet."

"Perhaps I am?"

She didn't answer, but her fingers, warm now, laced with his, giving him hope.

"I would love you, Catherine, if you will let me." He skimmed the knuckles of his free hand down her cheek, his heart turning over when he discovered a tear track. "At the least," he finished, his voice thick, "I would enjoy your companionship and value your skill and grace as Lady of Balkenzie."

Chapter 27

“**L**ady of Balkenzie?”

Caterine’s breath snagged.

She wouldn’t even consider the possibility of crossing the whole breadth of Scotland, becoming chatelaine of her champion’s castle. Just the notion, or perhaps her bedchamber’s persistent chill, sent a rush of icy shivers through her.

Dunlaidir was her home.

Surely aware of that irreversible fact, Sir Marmaduke simply held her, annoyingly calm as the night wind rattled the shutters and the most-times quietly-burning peat fire kept sending loud-popping showers of sparks into the air.

How could a famed champion, a knight as bold and rugged as any Highland warrior, remain so still and unperturbed? And at a time when he’d tossed out propositions that would upend her life? Her world, and all she cared about.

Dear heavens, he was set to rip her away from her hearth and home.

And so...

Reason was her only option.

“Do you know what will happen to James if I leave?” she said, lifting her voice against the wind and rattling shutters. “I could not bear such guilt.”

“You needn’t.”

He didn’t say anything else.

She glanced up at him, and inexplicable longing swept her. A crushing urge to cast aside her concerns and lose herself in the comfort of his words. The whatever-it-was-about-him that drew her so, made her want to abandon her usual reserve and...

Dia.

Seemingly unaware of her turmoil, he was looking away from her, toward the window embrasure. The scarred side of his face was in shadow, soft fire glow illuminating the unmarred side, the flickering light calling cruel attention to the strikingly handsome man he’d once been.

Her heart twisted at what he'd lost, and so much more than mere good looks. She blinked back the sudden heat stinging her eyes and drew a deep, cleansing breath of the earthy-sweet peat smoke. Then she forced herself to dwell on other storms and shadows, the ones that darkened her own heart.

Storms she couldn't let break, shadows she didn't want shrouding the lives of those she loved.

Or might come to love.

"You didn't answer me. Do you know what—" she began again, but he pressed two fingers against her lips, silencing her.

"James will outgrow your shadow," he said, his word choice making her wonder if he could indeed see into her soul, the conviction in his voice almost but not quite convincing her.

"Your stepson has a hard and steep path to follow, a difficult one, true, but not insurmountable."

"Sir Hugh—" she tried to speak past his fingers.

"—will be dealt with, I assure you."

He slid his thumb across her cheek, smoothing away her tear tracks, and her heart fluttered at the tenderness of the gesture, his gentle touch quelling her objections more thoroughly than any silencing fingers.

"I know you mean that," she said, her voice hitching. "I thank you."

"My promise is more than words, sweeting. It shall be done."

She nodded, and then brought her hand up to touch the scarred side of his face, her chest tight with the emotion banking inside her. But other thoughts whirled through her, too.

Wholly different ones, called forth by those she held most dear.

Dunlaidir's gruff seneschal, Eoghann, his bony shoulders having carried a weighty burden far too long. Sir John, her late husband's friend, a man whose own heart had been crushed by Sir Hugh. Even Lady Rhona, for all her long-nosed, meddlesome ways.

But most of all, James.

With the exception of her brothers, all of whom she hadn't seen in years, her stepson was the only male to have ever truly cared for her.

His kindness alone had made early years at Dunlaidir bearable. When she'd felt lonely and full of despair, he'd helped her patch together a semblance of her tattered pride and feel worthy again.

Despite the stains tarnishing her soul.

She couldn't leave him, not when he needed her most.

"You are quiet," her champion said then, his deep voice spooling through her, honeyed balm to her ragged cares. "Dare I hope you believe me? That I shall rid you of Sir Hugh and his villainy?"

"I believe you have lived away from England too long, Sir

Marmaduke Strongbow,” she said, finally managing to speak past the tightness in her throat.

She traced her fingertips along the crease of his scar, hoping the caress would gentle the bitterness of her words. “Your people are as sand kernels on a beach,” she began. “Dispatching Sir Hugh will bring but a breathing space of relief, for no sooner will he have been rooted out, but another will come to replace him.”

“Ach, lady.” Her champion sighed, a weary acknowledgment of the truth.

“That, my good sir, is why I bid you to stay. James will never be strong enough to stand against such might.” She glanced into the hearth fire, not wanting him to see the sheen of tears in her eyes. “Already, the garrison respects you. If you leave, they will lose heart again and we will be defeated before the first blow has even struck our proud and ancient walls.”

“You err,” he murmured against her crown.

She shook her head, her gaze still averted.

“Aye, you err gravely,” he said, louder this time. “And you just voiced the most glaring reason I must leave. My honor demands it.”

Caterine looked at him, no longer caring if he saw her distress. “Dear sir, I see only reasons for you to remain.”

“Say you?”

“I do.”

“Well, then...” He wound one of her braids around his hand, caressed its links with his thumb, much as he’d smoothed the same over her cheek moments before.

“Sweeting, you are not looking deeply enough to see the other reasons.” Releasing her hair, he slipped a finger under her chin and lifted her face. “Or you are seeing only what you want to see - James, as a weakling, unable to stand on his own.”

“That is not true.”

“It is how you see him,” he said. “But he is not weak. He’s merely troubled. The difference is a great one. He’s a fast and able student. He’s proven himself to all of us, especially to Lachlan, who trains with him often.”

“You’re trying to ease my mind.”

“So I am,” he returned. “That doesn’t change the truth of my words.”

“You are leading him down a path to nowhere with all your training. The men here will not follow him.” Caterine held his gaze, letting her stare dare him to disagree. “They look to you.”

He sighed then, and pulled her closer, snuggling her spoon-fashion against the hard contours of his body. “Do you not see they will continue to do so if I stay? Your garrison will only accept James once

he's shown them that he's a worthy leader. He cannot do that as long as we stand in his way."

"We?"

He nodded.

Caterine stiffened and would have jerked out of his arms were his hands not moving in such soothing circles across her shoulders and up and down her arms.

Purposely lulling her, trying to win her agreement.

"Aye, we," he murmured into her hair. "You, for coddling him. Me, because."

"Because you wield a heavy sword," she snipped, something inside her rebelling against being lulled.

"As can James," came his unruffled reply. "With practice. And if you let him."

"Let him?" She blinked. "There is nothing I would not do for him."

"It gladdens my heart to hear it." His bliss-spending hands stilled for a moment. "For when we truly love someone, my lady, sometimes we must also care enough to let go of them."

He began kneading her shoulders then, much as he'd done earlier. And, as before, cascades of warm, pleasurable tingles slid through her at his touch.

His magical touch.

Caterine sighed, her eyelids growing heavy.

"Sleep, sweeting," he said. His wondrous hands loosened her muscles – and her cares – one by one, easing her into a dreamlike state where the air was soft, misty, and warm.

A place where the arms cradling her proved more inviting than all the pillows mounded high upon her bed.

She also appreciated the rhythmic rise and fall of his warrior's chest, his steady breathing. Even his soft snores gave her more comfort than she'd ever known.

Snores?

Her eyes snapped open.

Watery, gray light leaked through the shutter slats, heralding the approach of a new day.

Unfortunately, the cold embers in the hearth seemed to mock her. They gave irrefutable evidence she'd spent the night in Sir Marmaduke Strongbow's arms.

More than that, she'd slept well there.

As had Leo.

Her little dog lay curled against the Sassunach's feet. And much to her astonishment, Leo appeared most content.

A *harrumph* rose in her throat, but lodged there with the startling realization that she felt no less at ease waking wrapped in her

champion's warmth, shielded by his goodness and strength.

Sometimes we must care enough to let go.

His words came out of nowhere, or perhaps they'd lingered through the night, floating in the darkness, waiting. Hovering on the threshold of some magical place the night had tried to take her, in the hopes of capturing her with the rising sun?

Care enough to let go.

Could she?

Abandon all she knew and loved...and the darkness inside her?

Could her champion slay her hidden foes as easily as he meant to rid her of more tangible menaces?

As she lay snuggled against him in the darkness, she stared into the deep, gray silence of the new day and wondered.

Chapter 28

The laird's due.

To most, fortress, title, and power.

To James Keith, an empty ewer of soured wine, an equally drained chalice, and a raging ache in his temples.

His laird's *duty*, pacing the broad sweep of his bedchamber's curving bank of windows and keeping his gaze trained on the narrow spit of land connecting Dunlaidir's walled compound with the rugged cliffs of the mainland. His circuit around his room, a cold vigil he'd kept all through the night as his burning eyes attested.

A poltroon's task.

A fool's errand as unpalatable as guzzling an infusion of devil's dung.

An indignity made bearable solely by Lady Rhona's bonnie presence.

Her generously proffered agreement to spend the night at his side, not in his bed where he'd like to have her, but patrolling the tall windows with him, watching the Highlanders and old Father Tomas trudge back and forth across the precarious land-bridge, bringing stuffs and weaponry to the villagers, then returning for more.

Wasted hours spent perusing mist and darkness.

Peering through wind-borne sleet.

Drinking stale wine.

"Master of Dunlaidir," he scoffed, throwing Rhona a dark glance. "Useful for naught but the far-reaching view out my bluidy windows."

"Pah!" Rhona grabbed his arm, halting his endless pacing, tempering his ire with an arched brow. "You will own they need your keen eyesight as well?"

"I admit that is what they claimed." James yanked his arm from her grasp. "Trying to console me is closer to the truth."

"Nae, that is not so." She stepped closer, trailed a finger down his arm. "The truth is that no one within these walls has eyes as good as yours."

"Or a better view."

"I think the view is rather fine," she gave back, her tone

annoyingly pleasant, her steady gaze making clear she meant anything but the broad sweep of sea and headlands they'd been watching since the wee hours. "Truth tell, it makes me rather fluttery."

"Blast a bluidy barnacle," James swore, the corners of mouth turning upward despite himself. "I vow you could make a rock smile."

"I'd rather see a stone cry," she said, her own smile fading for a moment.

"Aye, and seeing is what we're supposed to be doing," James reminded her, the rueful note in her voice spurring him to stand straighter, to at least appear more lairdly.

"We've been doing that quite well, I'd say. The stone-"

"Forget the stone." He placed his hand on the small of her back and guided her closer to the tall windows. "Come, lassie, let us continue to make use of this eyrie of mine," he added, sliding his arm around her, drawing her to him.

He was glad enough to window-watch the remainder of the night if only she would keep pressing her soft, sweet self against him as she did this moment.

"There, do you see them?" He pointed to the cliff-side path leading out of the village. "They are almost at the gatehouse."

He'd scarce said the words before the Highland knights emerged onto the narrow land-bridge. Hulking shapes, they moved through the darkness, their great brands slung over their shoulders, their mailed shirts gleaming softly in the gray light, an arsenal of dirks and other wicked-looking paraphernalia of war thrust beneath their belts and in their boots.

Several burdenless packhorses plodded behind them toward the stronghold, their slow pace and hanging heads telling evidence of the long night's toil.

"So they are done." James glanced at Rhona, then turned back to the windows. He braced his hands on the cold, damp stone of the nearest sill, and then strained his eyes to peer even deeper into the gloom. He needed to see if they were followed, or spied upon by a hidden foe.

But no one skulked through the eerie night save the Sassunach's own men. And now, with the merest hint of a lighter gray edging the horizon, they'd no doubt made their last haul and were eager to reach the hall's warmth and seek the comfort of their pallets.

Until the next night when they'd make the trek anew.

As he would stand vigil once more.

Partaking of his nightly *laird's due*.

And, if Rhona graced him with her company again, striving to feel more lairdly than the day before.

ABOUT THE SAME TIME, Sir Marmaduke stood at one of the two narrow window slits in Lady Catherine's ante-room and stared out across a pewter-colored sea of glass and wished the hours of the strange, magical night hadn't passed so quickly.

Holding his lady as she'd slept had been a bliss beyond all telling.

But now the cold gray of a new morn crept ever deeper into the shuttered bedchamber behind him, its damp chill stealing the wonders of the night.

The time of reckoning was upon him, the first being the highly suspicious puddle in the middle of his pallet. The wetness winked at him the instant he'd slipped into the ante-room just moments ago.

Nay, limped, not slipped, for allowing his lady's puddle-piddling pet to spend the night sprawled across his ankles had put his feet to sleep.

Such was his lot.

But with Lady Catherine as his prize, he wouldn't complain. He did rumple his nose at the wet spot.

The little dog had a skewed way of showing gratitude, and he was of a mind to have a word with the wee beastie. But he had more pressing matters to attend, and he'd best be about them before his lady awakened and caught him at it.

Some things weren't meant for a woman's fair eyes.

Especially when the woman in question was the one a man sought to impress.

Thus motivated, Marmaduke tried to pretend he didn't feel as if a thousand needle-footed insects marched over the soles of his feet, and knelt beside the large leather satchel he kept near his pallet.

A pouch that held a few of his most prized possessions.

His mouth pressed into a grim line, he rummaged through the pouch's contents until he found what he sought: a bronze mirror of great beauty and antiquity he'd once recovered from the oozing mud bank of a Highland peat bog, and a plumpish earthen jar of Linnet MacKenzie's special ragwort salve.

She called the bright yellow ointment a beauty treatment.

He liked to think of it as an anti-scar unguent.

By any name, after long years of daily use, the highly effective healing preparation had diminished the most frightening effects of his scarring, relaxing his facial muscles enough for him to re-learn the wholly underestimated art of being able to smile.

Though he'd never regain the handsomeness he'd once been so proud of, thanks to the miraculous workings of Lady Linnet's salve, he no longer looked as if he'd been cross-bred with a toad.

Marmaduke curled his fingers around the little jar, his gratitude heavy in his heart.

He never went anywhere without an ample supply, and not a day passed that he didn't rub a dollop of the precious wonder cream onto his blighted face.

This morn he'd splurge and use two dollops.

Bracing himself for the sight that never failed to smite him, he pushed to his feet and carried his treasures to the nearest window slit.

Once there, he used one hand to grip the mirror's intricately worked triple-looped handle, angling its polished surface to catch what watery light spilled through the narrow window. Then he began massaging a generous portion of the ragwort salve onto his scar.

In two days he'd marry again, and he needed all the miracles he could get, for the same muscles that allowed him to smile, also enabled him to kiss well.

And he meant to kiss his lady very, very well at the nuptial ceremony.

He'd already won a goodly portion of her trust, even access to her sweet body.

Leastways through the precious, and stirring, glimpses she'd allowed him. Her willingness to abandon restraint, to be so free with him, was the greatest gift. Carnal heat, the intense, irresistible flame of passion, was potent, its pleasure undeniable, but...

He wanted more.

He wanted her heart.

And a curl-her-toes-and-steal-her-breath wedding kiss seemed a good way to begin laying siege to the one thing she'd vowed she couldn't give him...her affections.

Her love.

The saints knew she already had his.

And so with great care, his jaw set in hard determination, he worked the glistening salve into his skin until every trace had been absorbed. Then he inhaled deeply of the briny new morn.

Two days.

Two more chances to reap the greatest benefit of Linnet MacKenzie's beautifying ointment.

And then his assault would begin in bitter earnest.

With soul-stealing, knee-melting kisses.

With relentless, irrepressible care.

Chapter 29

Two days later, on the other side of Scotland, a glittering coat of frost iced the stout walls of Clan MacKenzie's island stronghold, Eilean Creag. A keening wind, cold and black, tore with all its force across the crenellated battlements and whipped the surrounding waters of Loch Duich into a churning, white-capped frenzy.

But inside the castle's massive walling, in the smoky warmth of its dimly lit great hall, nothing stirred to greet the approach of another day.

Nary an errant draught dared ruffle the rush-strewn floor, or disturb the couple sleeping soundly in the bulky timbered bed claiming a place of honor on the raised dais at the far end of the cavernous hall.

Even the snores of the many MacKenzies slumbering 'round the hulking bed were muted snores. Those who valued their necks didn't snore at all.

Or toss and turn in their sleep.

Duncan MacKenzie, the famed Black Stag of Kintail, had issued strict orders: his lady wife's rest was not to be disturbed.

Nor was she allowed to leave the bed.

That she'd repeatedly done so, ignoring her husband's wishes and all good sense, was the reason he'd dismantled their bed, carted it belowstairs, then reassembled it in all its four-posted glory in full view of every man, woman, and child within Eilean Creag's walls.

And every last one of them had been ordered to keep an eye on her.

But this morn's dawning brought a fearsome determination to Linnet MacKenzie's waking heart.

A powerful urge to climb the turret stairs, brave the icy winds blasting across the ramparts, and greet the new day with special fondness and joy.

She would, too, if the great swell of her stomach hadn't robbed her of her strength. And if her most ardent nocturnal watcher hadn't plied his usual tricks by keeping one impressively muscled thigh slung possessively over her legs and an equally well-crafted arm clamped

around her girth.

Careful not to disturb the handsome brute, she slid a glance at her slumbering husband and weighed the dangers of slipping from his well-meant clutches.

“Do not even think to attempt it,” Duncan MacKenzie warned, not even cracking his eyes.

He did tighten his hold on her.

And as he did so, the edges of her world began to shimmer, the backs of her eyes to sting. But, for once, the knowledge welling inside her didn't bring ill tidings, reasons for fear. Only joy filled her heart, happiness she was so eager to share.



“GO BACK TO SLEEP,” Duncan told his wife, sure she wouldn't heed him. “You need rest.”

“No, I don't,” the flame-haired vixen responded, an odd breathiness in her voice, a sentimental thickness only she and a certain lout of an Englishman could achieve. “Not now.”

“Why not?”

“The day is here,” she said, the words banishing any last dredges of Duncan's own sleep, and replacing them with cold stark wakefulness.

“What day?” Pushing up on his elbows, he peered at her from narrowed eyes, his heart, his whole being lurching with ill-ease just from the look of her.

Faint torchlight leaked through the half-opened bed curtains and spilled across her pale face, revealing gold-flecked eyes, bright with the sheen of tears. Her lower lip also trembled, and that meant...

“The babe?!” Duncan sprang to his feet, not caring about his nakedness, or that their bed now stood in full view everyone in the great hall.

“Saints, Maria, and Joseph!” he roared, shoving his hands through his hair.

“Bluidy hell! 'Tis too soon!” he bellowed, a wounded beast, dread like none he'd ever known sluicing through him in great, cold waves. “Mother of God, preserve-”

“Of a mercy, husband, becalm yourself.” Shaking her head, Linnet smiled.

A reassuring smile meant for him, and every MacKenzie who now gaped at them. Men grog-eyed from sleep, the same terror stamped on their startled faces as he knew stood on his.

“Duncan, please. Everyone is staring,” she said, clutching the bedcovers to her swollen breasts. “You've roused them all with your

blustering, and to no purpose. The babe will not come for some weeks yet."

"And it is awake they aught be!" Whirling around, Duncan planted fisted hands against his hips and glowered at any who dared to meet his stare.

Glared at the lot of them until their snickers reminded him of his unclothed state.

Until the portent of his lady wife's words sifted past the thick cords of alarm twisting 'round his innards, tying his gut in knots and bows.

The babe will not come for weeks.

Cool bliss on his fired nerves.

Soothing balm to ease his fear of losing her, and their bairn.

The first she'd managed to carry this long.

Heaving a great sigh, he raked every gawker in his hall with a fierce stare. "This bed is here for one purpose only," he called out, his deep voice rising to the vaulted ceiling. "You are gathered round it for the same reason: to alert me if my lady attempts to leave it, or stop her folly if I am away."

He cast a warning look over his shoulder.

At her.

He'd deal with her repeated attempts to defy him later, after the safe delivery of the healthy bairn she insisted they'd be blessed with.

His bug-eyed men would taste his wrath now. "Lest you wish to wear sackcloth and dine on naught but soot and ash the rest of your days, hunker back down on your pallets or wherever else you choose to rest your heads and ignore what happens in or near this bed, lest my lady seeks to escape its confines."

Folding his arms, he waited until their grumbles, grunts, and rustlings found an end, then turned back to confront his misty-eyed wife.

If the babe wasn't the reason for her tears, he had a good idea who was.

The only other person with as big a heart – as *soft* a heart – as Linnet herself.

"So, sweeting..." He lowered himself onto the edge of the bed, and took her hand in his.

"So?" She looked at him, swiped at her cheek.

"What is with the great lout?" he began, concern for his friend almost as laming as his fear for her and the babe had been. "Have you had a vision?"

"I have," she admitted, nodding.

"Has something happened to him?"

Linnet shook her head, her heart too full for words.

Duncan frowned. "Your sister, then?" He smoothed the hair back

from her brow, the tender gesture belying his fierce expression. "Is she in danger?"

"Only of losing her heart," Linnet told him, her joy at the knowledge almost overwhelming her. "Our dear Sir Marmaduke has already lost his," she added, a tear leaking from the corner of one eye.

Duncan glanced to the side.

When he looked back at her, an unusual brightness misted his own eyes. "They are happy?" he asked, his deep voice low and gruff. "Your gift has shown you?"

"Aye, that, and my heart," she said, pressing the back of her free hand against his beloved cheek.

Capturing it, Duncan placed a kiss on her palm. "That one-eyed varlet truly loves again?" he persisted as if he found the possibility hard to believe.

Linnet nodded. "He does. I am certain."

"And she loves him?"

"Errr..." Suddenly tired, Linnet pulled her hands from his grasp and leaned back against the pillows. Lacing her fingers protectively over her stomach, she gave him a wan little smile. "I doubt she knows it yet, but, aye, she does."

Duncan smiled. "Sakes, but I am ready to see that English loon again," he vowed. "I shall bedevil him from here to the deepest, darkest bog in the land and back for being so bull-headed when we urged him to go to your sister's aid."

A snort came from somewhere in the shadows. "When will we see the lovesick fool again?"

Linnet's smile widened upon recognizing the voice.

Fergus, Eilean Creag's cantankerous, but much-loved seneschal.

"Ah, well..." Linnet shifted to peer into the gloom, looking for him.

"Humph." Her husband's brows snapped together as he, too, combed the smoke-hazed great hall, searching for the crusty old man. The only soul in all of Kintail who'd dare break his order of silence.

"Dinnae seek to skewer me with your stare, laddie." The grizzle-headed steward thrust his bristly chin forward the instant Duncan's stare found him. "I am weary of his frippery and gewgaws crowding my hall," the graybeard fussed, excusing his daring with a nod toward the teetering piles of Sir Marmaduke's possessions stacked just inside the hall's arched entry.

A mountain of household items, weaponry, and, as Fergus had claimed, fanciful baubles and trinkets only one as romantically inclined as Sir Marmaduke Strongbow would appreciate.

A wealth of goods Duncan and his men had been transporting across Loch Duich, to Marmaduke's as-yet-unoccupied Balkenzie, by the boatload, for weeks now.

And yet...

They still hadn't made the slightest dent in the Sassunach knight's accumulated belongings.

"Tis time he returns and life gets back to normal in these parts," Fergus grumbled, then flounced onto his side on the makeshift pallet he shared with his equally aged wife. The bony arm he flung over his head signaled he'd lose no more words on the subject.

And if there'd been any doubt, his particularly distinctive snores – high-pitched wheezy ones – soon heralded the end to his disruptions.

"So, lass," Duncan murmured, turning back to his wife, "when will we see that lumbering oaf again? Is his return nigh? Is that what you meant when you said '*today is the day*'?"

"Nae," Linnet answered, her eyes shining again. "I do not know when he will return. You should know by now that I cannot scry at will."

Pausing, she sent a quick glance to the mounds of goods crowding the opposite end of the hall. "But I pray it will be in time for Yuletide at Balkenzie Castle as we are hoping."

"Then what day is today?"

"Their wedding day," she said, and Duncan didn't doubt her for an instant. "Today is the day they will marry."

Chapter 30

H*er wedding day.*

Catherine paused on the top landing of the outer stairs and stared down at the milling throng crowding Dunlaidir's bailey. The unaccustomed activity warmed her heart even as she felt torn between exhilaration and ill-ease.

"They came, my lady," Rhona enthused beside her, *her* excitement barely contained. "Your people are all here, just as Sir Marmaduke said they'd be."

Too moved to speak, Catherine reached for her friend's hand and squeezed tight.

The good folk of Dunlaidir had indeed come, just as her soon-to-be-husband had predicted. And from what she could tell, they'd brought all their friends and family with them.

Her emotions welling, she strained her eyes to peer through the billowing sheets of thick white mist drifting across the cobbled bailey.

A sea of familiar faces returned her gaze.

Beaming faces full of pride and hope.

Beloved souls she hadn't seen in many long months, but that now smiled up at her from the bottom of the stairs. They also shouted well-wishes, some lifting their voices to be heard from as far away as the distant gatehouse.

Clinging to Rhona's hand, Catherine drew a deep breath of the frosty air and struggled to find her voice.

"Are there truly so many?" she finally pushed past the hot lump swelling in her throat. "I do not trust my own eyes."

"Ah, but you can," Rhona answered, a catch in her own voice. "They are here in numbers to rival the stars in the night sky. I vow they line the land-bridge to the mainland, and clog the cliff path to the village.

"And," she went on, tilting her head to the side, "if my ears aren't teasing me, isn't that the kirk bell?"

It was.

Muffled by sea fog, but its every chime striking loud and beckoning in Catherine's heart.

The bell's pealing, and her companion's excitement, swept her away from her cares, filling her, too, with exhilaration.

And hope.

Her soon-to-be-husband gave her that.

In truth, the unexpected happiness had been building ever since he'd ridden into the courtyard, dropped on bended knee, and pressed a gallant kiss to her hand.

The hope, and a sense of rightness, had arrived later. But it grew stronger by the day.

"Come, my lady," Rhona urged then, tugging her down the stairs even as she spoke. "It's time."

Aye, it is, and many blessings to you...

The voice, feminine, dark and sultry, rose above the revels of the crowd, soft as the drifting mist, but as distinct as if the words had been whispered directly to Catherine.

She whirled around to ask Rhona if she'd heard the voice, too, but James had already seized her friend's arm and was now escorting her to a waiting horse.

And not a one of the boisterous shouts of the villagers matched the soft, almost melancholy, note of the woman whose blessing had just hushed past her ear.

A chill that had nothing to do with the frosty, cloud-cast afternoon streaked down her back. She glanced about, then drew her cloak against the cold, and let Eoghann help her onto her horse.

Eager to reach the little clifftop chapel and the brave champion who awaited her there, she'd no sooner gathered her reins before a furtive movement near the seaward wall caught her eye.

A lone woman stood there, hauntingly beautiful, dark as Rhona, but tall and willowy.

Strangely silent.

And cloaked more by the swirling mist than the cowled robes she wore. As Catherine stared, the woman lifted her hand in salutation, then drew the back of her fingers across her cheek, just below her shadowed eyes.

As if to wipe away tears.

Catherine's nape prickled and she tried to wheel her mare toward the woman, to go to her, but in that same moment, Eoghann smacked the horse on the rump and James called out the command to ride forward.

Her efforts thwarted, Catherine and her little party clattered beneath the raised portcullis of the innermost gatehouse. But before her horse could carry her too deeply into the darkness of the tunnel-like pend, she twisted around to look back.

The woman was gone.

Nothing moved near the seaward wall save curtains of shifting mist.

Then the crowd surged forward, pushing into the pend behind them, each celebrant caught up in the excitement of the day, just as more of the mysterious woman's words were caught up in the wind.

A cold, dark wind that followed her through the yawning tunnel as surely as the cheering villagers.

Love him well, Lady Caterine, the voice implored.

I bid you love him well.



LOOKING FAR TOO confident for one so blighted, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow waited for his bride beneath the arched entry porch of the village kirk, and drew the simmering wrath of a dark-cloaked figure standing but a few paces away.

Every bit as hard-bitten as the Highlanders gathered round the tall Sassunach, the silent watcher fought back a sneer at their protective stances.

Their weapon-hung brawn and steel-eyed bravura.

As if his man would strike now, with the cold she-bitch and her entourage nearly upon them. He almost gave a derisive snort, but wisely disguised it as a cough.

For some reason he couldn't fathom, his liege still wanted the woman. Nor would he wish a melee to erupt among the villagers, who, for whatever dubious reasons, chose this day to show their loyalty to the castlefolk.

The cloaked figure glowered at the lot of them.

Simpering fools to a man, but his lord needed their backs and would take out the loss of every set of toiling hands on him.

An outrage.

His fury heating, he returned his gaze to the Sassunach.

God's blood, but the bastard could stand proud.

Gall bubbled and roiled in his belly, but he ignored the discomfort. The Sassunach's comeuppance would claim him soon, after the nuptial ceremony. And neither his skill with a blade nor his fierce-eyed Highland knights would save him.

Most especially not the gawking simpletons lining the road, craning their necks for a glimpse of the beast's bride.

Drawing the hood of his mantle closer about his face, as much to shield his ears from the incessant ringing of the kirk bell as to hide his black frown, he turned his attention to the bridal party's approach.

But in truth, his gaze moved carefully down the line of poor sods flanking the village road.

He searched the crowd for a single man.

But as if the saints had taken sides and weren't on his, thick sea-mist rose in great clouds over the cliffs to drift inland, creeping across roofs and between the densely clustered stone cottages.

Billowing curtains of fog sent from above to cloak the jostling onlookers in a great white shroud. A near impenetrable one that hampered his ability to locate the face he sought, and that interference darkened his mood.

As did the piercing glare he knew was aimed his way from the distant hills where Sir Hugh de la Hogue and his men watched the proceedings from afar.

Ever fond of his own neck, de la Hogue had no desire to soil his hands this day.

The sorry task had been left to him.

And he'd passed it on to a graceless craven who seemed to have vanished in the crowd.

Giving up all pretense of playing the amused courtier to a wedding of two souls he abhorred, the cloaked figure indulged himself in huff of contempt he'd been holding back, and slipped away from his position near the church steps to meld with the masses.

His nose wrinkling in distaste, he suffered the indignity of rubbing elbows with the peasants, and went in search of Sir Marmaduke Strongbow's assassin.



"SPINELESS BASTARDS, HIDING IN THE MIST." Sir Alec ranged himself closer to the edge of the church steps. "Have you seen them?"

"For a time, aye." Sir Marmaduke tore his attention from the approaching bridal party, and followed his friend's gaze to a distant ridge where de la Hogue and his mounted miscreants aimed fierce glowers at the men of Kintail.

Their stares, more felt than seen because of the swirling mist, bored holes straight through Marmaduke's fur-lined cloak, the resplendence of his deep blue surcoat, and the steel mesh of the hauberk he wore beneath it.

"Let them watch." He kept his hand on his sword-hilt as he shot another glance at his lady. Nearing the middle of the village, she held herself tall in the saddle, the lift of her chin hinting that she'd noticed their uninvited guest, and possessed the backbone to ignore him.

"I can feel their fury." Sir Alec gripped his sword as well. "I dinnae like it."

"Neither do I." Marmaduke glanced at his friend. "But they have reason to fume. Sir Hugh loses a great prize this day."

"That he does. And you take home the treasure."

"Aye, and with the greatest pleasure." His chest swelling with pride, Marmaduke looked again toward his approaching bride, let his gaze drift over her. In a beat, he forgot his cares and just gloried in every detail of her appearance. The shimmering folds of her sister's wedding veil – just one of the special gifts Lady Linnet had sent along for her. The glossy braids curled over her ears, their gleaming perfection teasing him through the transparency of her head veil.

Tempting him as he imagined her glorious golden tresses spilling free to her hips. Unclothed hips, the whole of her bared to his gaze, her arms opened wide, welcoming him...

"Bleeding ballocks," he snarled, banishing the image before he embarrassed himself.

He did scowl at the distant ridge.

The thought of de la Hogue having even courted the idea of making Catherine his, doused the fire her comeliness had sent licking through him.

"They aren't budging. Shall we disperse them?" Gowan said beside him, clearly mistaking the reason for his snarl. "We have archers near that hill. A few well-placed bow shots."

"Nay."

"Nay?"

"You heard me." Marmaduke turned to his friend. "The dastard wants to provoke us," he said, dipping into a well of patience the Highlanders lacked. "He will take his miscreants and leave when he sees he cannot undo this day."

A look of incredulity washed over Gowan's bearded face. "Since when do you shy away from a good blood-letting?"

"Perhaps since I do not wish my lady to witness a massacre on her wedding day."

"Perhaps since falling in love has turned you into mush, I'll own," Gowan muttered, and Marmaduke didn't bother to contradict him.

He *had* fallen in love.

Cuffing his friend on the arm, he said, "Perhaps I simply refuse to let some swollen-headed blackguard ruin my own pleasure in this day."

"Ah, well! There we have it." Gowan swung round to the other MacKenzies. "I knew he loved her," he guffawed, slapping the nearest Highlander, Sir Ross, on the back.

Good-natured ribbing ensued, the tension, for the moment, diffused.

Letting them to their ribaldry, Marmaduke curled his fingers around the signet ring pressing into his palm and scanned the crush of villagers and fishing folk pouring into the little churchyard.

Interspersed among them were heavily armed men from the Keith garrison, those who'd been there upon his arrival at Dunlaidir, and a few village men newly welcomed into their ranks.

Unlike the villagers, who concealed the goods of war recently distributed to them, these men wore their metal boldly and were well-skilled in using such weapons.

Other stalwarts skirted the village, unseen and silent, these souls skilled in darker methods of warfare.

A rough lot, but loyal.

And willing to ply their unsavory trade without blinking if need be.

Only Marmaduke's own men shifted and fidgeted, their jesting already giving way to more serious pursuits. Their brows once more darkening with Highland edginess, they cast repeated glances at the mist-draped ridge.

"All are ready." Sir Ross claimed Marmaduke's ear. "One word, and all is done."

"Not this day." Marmaduke's clipped words left no room for argument.

With a grim nod, he indicated the perspiring Father Tomas. The holy man hovered just inside the church door, praying and wringing his age-spotted hands.

At the sight, some of the bluster ebbed out of the Highlanders and Marmaduke released a long breath. "There are times I am almost grateful for the coolness of my English blood," he said, more to himself than to his men.

"The craven will be cornered soon enough, but lest he come closer, I mind it's wiser – for now - to let him see this marriage is a true one," he added, lifting up his voice so the black-frocked priest was sure to hear. "We can draw steel on him later, when innocents won't be caught in the fray."

An audible sigh of relief came from the candle-lit interior of the little stone chapel.

Grumbles of discontent issued from his men.

But both the relief and grumbles soon gave way to the joyous roar that went up from the crowd when at last the bridal party rode into the churchyard and Lady Catherine Keith reined in before her groom.

Chapter 31

“**I**n the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost,” Sir

Marmaduke said, slipping his signet ring successively onto the thumb, fore, and middle finger of his bride’s left hand.

Awed by the raw emotion surging through him, he drew a ragged breath, holding it in for the sheerest moment – and eternity to let his demons rage and howl – but not a one of them raised their ugly heads. Nothing stirred inside him save the fierce pounding of his heart.

For once, his devils showed mercy and gave him peace.

Then, on the cold and windy porch of the little stone chapel and before they could change their minds, he released his relief on the breath he’d been holding and uttered the words that made Catherine Keith his wife.

“With this ring I thee wed,” he said, and eased the ruby heirloom onto her ring finger.

Surprised at the thickness in her new husband’s voice, Catherine held the too-large ring in place with her thumb, and wondered at the unexpected rush of emotion closing her own throat.

Something fine and sweet burst to splendid flowering deep inside her, and she stood perfectly still, savoring it, as he reached for her head veil. The look on his face as he did so, his smoldering intensity, filled her with unexpected contentment, and chased all other concerns.

Silenced the raucous cheering behind them.

Stilling as well, the wet, sniffing noises so close they could only come from Rhona, and even the droning voice of Father Tomas speaking the homily she’d heard so many times before.

Everything faded save the tenderness and pride on her champion’s face – and the exhilarating surety that he was about to kiss her.

Now, while James yet recited all she brought to the union as her dowry.

The words indistinct, she heard only the thunder of her heart. Then she raised her chin and met her new husband’s gaze, waiting as he smoothed back the shimmering silk of her borrowed veil. Freely, even eagerly, she offered her lips in a gesture meant to publicly honor

his gallantry.

And to speed the kiss she burned to receive.

A kiss the onlookers apparently wanted, too, for the din in the churchyard rose to a fevered pitch. She blinked, fierce yearning scorching a path of twisting, breathless anticipation all through her, even clear to her toes.

This man, her champion, and now her lord husband, was responsible.

He quickened her blood as never before, and he did so here, before all her people, and in the shadow of Dunlaidir, the home that meant so much to her.

How odd that he suddenly meant as much.

No, even more.

"I am going to kiss you," he said, beguiling her with six simple words.

And once I have, I shall never let you go.

Those words hovered between them, alive and pulsing, elusive as the frosty puffs of their breath. Truly spoken or heard with her heart, she'd never know because they'd no sooner touched her ear before he lifted his hand to her face.

Claimed her with one touch.

"My wife," he said, the depth of emotion in the two huskily spoken words pricking the backs of her eyes. "May God have mercy on any who try to take you from me."

He wrapped his arms around her in a crushing embrace. A claiming so fierce, the steel links of his hauberk pressed into her, branding her.

Never let you go. The words came again, softer than a sigh this time, sweeter than a caress, and pouring a floodtide of light and warmth into her soul.

For a long moment, he looked deep into her eyes, that compelling intensity of his saying more than any hushed words she may or may not have heard.

Then...

"Tis done," he said, cradling the back of her head with one firm hand. He splayed the other around her hip, urging her closer still, molding her to his strength.

"Aye." She leaned into him, sliding her hands along the broad reach of his shoulders, ignoring the whispers of doubt warning that with the giving of her kiss, she'd also lose her heart.

That danger paling beside the headiness of his embrace, she looped her arms around his neck and met his descending lips halfway, her boldness amply rewarded by the mastery of his kiss.

The seizing not just of her lips, but of her very essence. A display

wholly inappropriate for their sanctified surroundings, but so bone-meltingly right, its sheer glory stole her breath.

She swayed a bit and his arms tightened around her, drawing her higher, more intimately against him. "You are mine," he affirmed, pulling back just enough to sear the claim against her cheek.

"Now and henceforth," he breathed, slanting his mouth over hers for one last taking of her sweetness.

A gift she gave freely, parting her lips beneath his, boldly inviting the full sweep of his tongue and matching it with the heated glide of her own.

A sensual frenzy, a desperate tangling far too rousing to indulge in on the chapel steps, before the final blessing, and in full view of all who'd braved the day's bluster to see them wed.

At last he tore his mouth from hers, but didn't ease completely away until he'd sealed their vows with a softer, gentler kiss.

The merest hush of his lips over hers, the slightest parting touch of his tongue to the very tip of hers. Whisper-sweet, but powerful enough to wrest a groan from the very bottom of his soul when he finally set her from him.

A groan so loud in the silence surrounding them, he couldn't even muster his field-of-battle stone-face.

Not even the muted thunder of de la Hogue's furious departure from the ridge helped gather his wits.

His heart thumping, he smoothed his surcoat, the crushing quiet whirling around him, drawing all focus on his passion, his loss of control.

Even the wind seemed to have held its howling breath to spy on his lusting.

Unaccustomed heat crept up his neck and he turned his back on the gaping throng, more shaken than he cared to admit. Braving the wide-eyed shock of the priest, he grabbed his wife's hand and pulled her inside the chapel for the nuptial mass before the crowd's hoots and cheers could begin anew.

His men weren't so easily thwarted.

"Ho! Did you e'er see the like?" Sir Gowan roared, his deep voice cutting the stillness. "Would that Duncan were here to witness the Sassunach's surrender to a kiss!"

The Highlander's mirth unleashed a fresh wave of jubilation so rowdy, even the solemnity of the fusty-aired nave couldn't hinder its intrusion.

Blessedly, his men settled as they filed inside the holy place, their knavery contained to impatient shuffling, a few elbow jabs, and a smattering of over-exaggerated eye rolls.

Determined to ignore them, Marmaduke held fast to Catherine's

hand as they knelt for Father Tomas' final blessing. And if it came with more of a quaver than there would have been had he not just helped himself to a wild-slaking kiss from his bride's tempting lips, he pretended not to notice.

If a worse fate than suffering his men's antics and testing Father Tomas' sensibilities did not befall him before the dawn, he would deem himself a well-blessed man.

His head still bowed, he slid a glance at his bride. Thick-fringed lashes, surprising black for one so fair, rested on her cheeks, and the golden coils of her braids gleamed in the candlelight.

Her lips moved in silent prayer, promptly recalling the sharp, heated lust that had speared through him when they'd moved so sweetly beneath his in their first shared kiss.

The first of many, and all manner of them.

At the thought, elation swept him. A joy so boundless even his devils didn't dare question his right to revel in it.

Even so, he didn't want to tempt fate, so he returned his gaze to the stone-flagged floor and fought back a smile as he finished the prayer.

He was indeed a well-blessed man.

Not much later, in the gloaming hour of a near-perfect day, the returning wedding party neared the bulk of Dunlaidir's gatehouse. Torches blazing just inside the tunnel-like entrance beckoned refuge, but the low-hanging clouds, the same pewter-gray as the sea, pleased Marmaduke more.

Their roiling masses almost touched the tossing waters, blurring the horizon and blending with the fog to promise a fine, moonless night.

A blessing, if the small raiding party he would lead later that night wished to cross the sleeping moorland, swiftly and unseen.

But the persistent throbbing in his temples had nothing to do with blessings. And so he kept his gaze trained ahead, then expelled a sigh of relief when the slow-moving column of revelers began passing beneath the gatehouse's raised portcullis.

Even so, he scanned the arched entrance for movement that shouldn't be there. But the sputtering torchlight revealed nothing more ominous than wildly dancing shadows. Nothing gave cause for alarm save the sharp-edged uneasiness flitting around his every nerve ending like a swarm of whirling midges.

An odd prickling in his nape that kept his hand not far from his sword-hilt.

His gaze, alert and wary.

Sir Ross fell in beside him, edging his shaggy-felled garron closer to Marmaduke's larger steed. "I dislike this more than if a horde of screaming banshees poured from yon gatehouse," he bit out. "At least then we'd ken where to aim our blows."

"We are warriors enough to—" Marmaduke broke off at a sudden commotion in the scrubby trees to their right.

Kneeing his horse in front of his wife's, he whipped out his sword with an ear-piercing *zing* just as an arrow whistled past his shoulder, missing him by inches before it cracked into a nearby boulder.

"God's bones!" he roared, reining round to scan the little copse of stunted ash and bramble.

Swords drawn, his men spurred forward to form a protective

cordon around Catherine and Rhona. From all along the cliff road, came the scrape of countless other weapons being wrenched free as armed villagers and fishing folk took up fighting stances, each man ready to test newly-learned skills on any and all comers.

But none came.

Nothing marred the stillness save the frantic baying of dogs somewhere in the distance and the frenzied clashing of steel somewhere inside the copse of trees.

Cold fury washing over him, Marmaduke threw a look at his lady. "Stay here, heed my men," he warned her, then spurred off toward the skirmish.

A second arrow sped past him as he neared the copse, but this time the arrow came from a different direction. This arrow flew into the trees, a dull *thwack* and a sharply cut-off cry signaling it'd found a mark.

Even so, the thrashing and cursing continued.

Urging his horse to greater speed, he pulled up before the trees just as a wild-eyed, hard-panting bear of a man crashed out of the underbrush, a reddened battle-ax in his hand, a dead man slung over his shoulder.

A dead man with an arrow shaft protruding from his back.

The giant carrying the body lumbered forward, swaying a bit under the dead man's weight. Marmaduke recognized the big man as Black Dugie, Dunlaidir's newly returned smith.

A man he'd deemed trustworthy, if a mite simple-witted.

Leaping down, Marmaduke closed the distance between them with long strides. "Saints alive! What goes on here?"

The blacksmith dropped the felled man onto the ground and spat on him. "I spotted him creeping through the trees and followed him." Black Dugie panted, glaring at the corpse.

He nudged the quiver of arrows at the man's belt with a worn-toed boot. "When he drew an arrow, I hurried to stop him, but..." He trailed off when James and Sir John thundered up, their faces as dark as the fast-descending night.

They reined in so abruptly, their horses reared high, the beasts' powerful forelegs flailing in midair before pounding back to earth mere inches from the slain man's body.

His temper clearly strained, James stilled his mount with surprising mastery. "But what?" he prompted the long-errant smithy. He leaned forward to eye the big man with rampant mistrust.

Black Dugie thrust out his bearded chin. "But I wasn't fast enough to get to the Sassunach bastard, is what."

Marmaduke grabbed the man's arm. "He was English?"

The smithy nodded. "I heard him speak. He cursed me to hell and

back when I ruined his second shot. He was aiming for you again, or maybe Lady Catherine. I don't know, but I jumped him and-"

"How do we know you didn't loose the arrow that nearly struck Sir Marmaduke?" Sir John grated, suspicion blazing in his eyes.

Keeping his mount, he glanced from the body to the bloodied battle-ax still in Black Dugie's hand. "Perhaps you axed that poor soul so you could blame him for your own dark deed?"

Black Dugie flung down the ax and clenched meaty fists. "I'll own I hacked at him a few times but no' so good as to kill him."

He turned to Marmaduke. "Word was no' to kill anyone because you'd want to question any troublemakers," he said, somewhat calmer. "The second arrow did him in, no' my ax."

"An arrow you could have shot." That from James.

"Nay, he couldn't have," Marmaduke said, grimacing at the implication. "The arrow came from thon woods."

Shifting in his saddle, he pointed his sword at a wooded knoll some distance away. "It exited from there."

And whoever fired it, meant to silence that wretch's tongue before Black Dugie could haul him before me.

Keeping that sentiment to himself, Marmaduke sheathed his steel, no longer concerned that a second assassin lurked in the surrounding woods.

His instincts – and a chill slithering down his spine – told him the danger lurked much closer.

So keenly aware of treachery he could taste its foulness on the frosty air, he clamped a hand on the smithy's blood-sullied shoulder. "I am indebted to you," he said simply, but meant every word.

"I'd like to see you tending Dunlaidir's forge, but if you so desire, you are welcome to accompany me to Balkenzie when I leave. I am in need of a good smith."

The big man inclined his head, clearly not used to praise.

James' face colored. "And what of Dunlaidir?"

"A new smithy would be found and engaged before my departure," Marmaduke assured him. "One equally skilled, never worry."

"Humph," James returned, but nodded.

Sir John began muttering under his breath about insolents and rabble.

Marmaduke ignored him. "Do something with the body, then take yourself to Eoghann," he ordered Black Dugie, lifting his voice above Sir John's grumbles.

"I'll make sure he prepares a bath and fresh clothes for you. Then join us in the hall for the wedding feast." He let go of the smith's shoulder, but clapped him on the arm before he turned away. "You will be made welcome, I promise."

That settled, Marmaduke swung up onto his saddle and schooled his features into his best set-faced expression, then looked at the other two men.

James.

Sir John.

One, a traitor.

But, why?

He burned to know, and would, but first, he'd bide his time. An enemy watched closely was a harmless one.

He also had other matters weighing on his mind.

"Come, my bride waits," he said, heeding the most pressing of them. "And we, my good men, have a long night ahead of us."

Chapter 33

A few hours later, but worlds away from the little stone chapel and the thrill of a champion's kiss, Catherine stood in the shadowy cold of Dunlaidir's undercroft and watched as her new husband pulled his handsome blue surcoat over his head.

He tossed its resplendence onto the stone-flagged floor, then discarded his mailed hauberk as well. Now, wearing nothing but leather hose, knee-high boots, and a linen undershirt, his magnificence stole her breath.

A bold air of confidence surrounded him, a calm and steely determination she hoped would see him through the coming raid unscathed.

Her own bravura faltered when he took a fine English-styled gambeson from Eoghann's outstretched hands, and donned it with the quiet assurance of a man who'd seen many battles, and didn't flinch at facing another.

She did quake at the notion, and the well-padded leather shirt sent rivers of dread pouring through her.

Knights – the well-equipped Sassunach ones – wore such protective garments beneath their hauberks to absorb the shock of heavy blows.

Or lessen the penetration of a well-aimed bow shot.

Never had she seen one donned for the mere lifting of a few head of Scottish cattle.

Alarm constricting her heart, she stepped from the shadows. "I would speak with you," she said to her husband. "Privily."

"Then do." He smiled, the dangerous glint in his good eye warming to one of amusement. "Lest you wish to discuss that which we shall attend upon my return, there is nothing you cannot address before my men."

Behind her, one of his not-so-gallant stalwarts chuckled.

The others joined in.

"I see matters differently," Catherine dared. Her cheeks flaming, she slid a look at Black Dugie.

The smithy guarded an archway out of the undercroft, blocking the stairs with the sheer mass of his bulk and a frown as dark as his name.

Fisting her hands against her hips, Catherine looked back at her husband. "I have eyes," she said. "All here are not your men."

"Perhaps not, but there is nary a soul present whose heart I do not trust."

Catherine just looked at him.

He folded his arms, but relented first, chucking her under the chin. "I am pleased to have married a plain-speaking woman."

"Meaning?"

"This, my lady." His gaze locked on hers, he lifted her hand and kissed it. "I shall always enjoy hearing your mind. And I shall do so regarding any and all matters. So tell me what troubles you?"

More chortles came from his men.

"Well?" He held fast to her hand and rubbed his thumb back and forth over the large ruby of his signet ring.

A ring now on her hand.

"Ahhh..." she began, then faltered, distracted by the tingly sensations sweeping up her arm. Unnerved, she glanced at his men, and quickly recalled the reason for her concern.

The Highlanders stood about in varying stages of undress, each one adorning himself with the trappings of war. All save Sir Lachlan, who'd been ordered to remain behind to help maintain the premise that Sir Marmaduke had vanished abovestairs to bed his new wife when, later, he and his small raiding party slipped from the hall.

"Well?" her husband asked again, now smoothing his knuckles down her arm. "Are you still troubled by the incident on the road?"

"Nothing privy 'bout that," Sir Gowan tossed between them, his words muffled by the boiled-leather jerkin he was drawing over his head. "We all ken what happened."

"So we do." Sir Ross looked up from stuffing mail coifs, and the padded head-caps worn beneath them, into a leather pouch. "That blighted devil won't be darkening the road to Dunlaidir ever again.

"Man's dead, he is." He aimed a reassuring smile her way, but the sight of the steel-mesh headgear dangling from his fingers proved more disconcerting than comforting.

It was telling.

And the reason for the ill-ease marching up and down her spine.

"I am not concerned about the dead man," she said. "He would only trouble me if his arrow had struck true."

"Indeed?" Sir Marmaduke cupped her chin and looked deep into her eyes.

"Aye, that is so," she told him true, frustration writhing like a trapped serpent in her belly. "He meant to kill you."

"But he did not."

"Oooh!" She jerked free and waved a hand at the knightly war-

goods scattered all about them. "Since when is such metal needed to lift a few a cattle?"

Since I learned we'd be routing a traitor along with fetching a bit of fair eating for your table.

"Since someone attempted to fire an arrow in your back or mine on our return from the chapel," Marmaduke said aloud, and hoped the half-truth would soothe her.

It didn't.

She stood straighter and squared her shoulders, narrowed her sapphire eyes. "Sir, I believe you are trying to shield me."

"Is that not what champions do?" He smiled. "That, and slay dragons."

Something indefinable, but disturbing enough to lance his heart, flashed across her face. "I doubt anyone can slay mine." The words came so softly he scarce heard them. "Not all of them."

"You err, my lady." He slid his arm around her shoulders and drew her aside, away from his men. "You err greatly."

"Is that so?"

"It is, and beyond all doubt."

She'd removed her sister's veil and he touched his fingers to the sleekness of her coiled braids. The urge to undo them and bury his face in her unbound hair was strong, but the clink of metal all around them kept his head cool.

He'd enjoy the glories of her beautiful tresses later.

"And how do I err?" she asked, catching his gaze. "Will you tell me?"

"Indeed." Gladly capitulating, he gathered her close and knew true peace when she slipped her arms around him and pressed her cheek against his shoulder.

"You err, because I shall not only slay each and every one of your dragons, but scatter their remains on the four winds so they can never darken your heart again."

The promise made, he lifted his chin and kissed her.

Not the hot slaking kiss he'd given her in the church, but one of great tenderness. A smooth and gentle caressing, a mere grazing of his lips over hers, until he'd absorbed enough of her sweetness to hold him through the hours to come.

And, hopefully, until some of the doubt left her heart.

Easing away at last, he nuzzled his face against her cheek. "Every last dragon, my lady, and we shall begin hastening their demise as soon as I've returned."

As soon as I've returned.

The promise steadied her, shoring up her backbone with each blessed whirl across her heart. Encouraged by the faith she put in his vow, Catherine sat beside her husband at the wedding feast, if the chaos in the great hall could be called such. She also struggled to ignore the swiftly passing hours.

Soon it'd be time for him to steal away.

The surety of it stood reflected in the drunken cries of the revelers, in the spit and hiss of the guttering torches, their flames nearly spent, and in the increasing number of heads slumped upon the long tables.

Snoring heads.

Carousers too deep in their cups to notice when her brave champion and his stalwarts took their leave.

Or, as evident in some of the hall's murkier corners, too lost in wanton pursuits to care.

Peering past the rows of tables, Catherine's gaze sought and found Rhona. Like many of the ale-headed celebrants, her friend and James had indulged in amorous tanglings most of the evening. But now the secluded alcove where they'd entertained their passion loomed empty.

Save for Rhona.

She leaned against the stone tracery of the alcove's lancet window, half-hidden in the shadows, strumming her lute and singing a love song. But when Catherine caught her eye, she set the lute on the window seat, a signal meant for Catherine alone.

Confirmation that James had left her side to meet Sir John in the darkest corner of the bailey where they'd wait with saddled horses until the other men joined them.

The time had come.

Every last dragon.

The words, and the dragon slayer's hand sliding over hers where it rested on the table, gave her strength to continue the game.

"My husband..." she began, smiling at him.

He looked at her, returned the smile. "Aye, my sweet?"

"Mercy," she said, pushing back the trencher they'd shared, speaking the rehearsed words. "If I eat another bite of roasted seabird, I shall fly away."

Sir Marmaduke's fingers, so strong and warm, gave hers a reassuring squeeze.

His man, the bearded Gowan, glanced at her, and inclined his head. Then, pushing to his feet, he strode off through the smoke-hazed hall, and vanished.

Soon the others would rise as well and, one by one, disappear.

Playing their parts, as had she for the last hour or so, plying her new husband with all the dubious delicacies Dunlaidir's depleted

stores could offer. Imbibing more braised sea-tangle and bannocks than her stomach could bear.

And smiling all the while.

In true wedding feast custom, she'd also sipped hippocras from the same cup as her groom and indulged the onlookers' glee by letting him kiss droplets of the heady spiced wine from her lips. He'd even caught one or two from her chin with his tongue.

That, the watching throng had loved.

And so had she, boldly wondering how many dragons his wickedly rousing tongue could banish.

But for now, such delights spun unheeded on the farthest edges of her mind, banished there by the departure of another MacKenzie. Sir Ross, a large man of no particular grace, had slipped away as quietly as if he'd never been there at all.

And he'd taken Sir Alec with him, for that veteran knight's place at the end of the high table stood vacant as well. One moment he'd been there. The next, he was gone.

Only Sir Lachlan remained, and would.

His part, to loudly declare that Sir Marmaduke Strongbow had taken his bride to bed, should any possess the wits to notice their absence.

Or the daring to comment if they did.

"My lady, it is time for us to go." The words, murmured just above her ear, startled her. Without realizing she'd moved, she was on her feet, the iron strength of her champion's arm firm around her waist.

No one in the hall objected.

Not a soul called out.

Only he hesitated, looking at her with such intensity, his gaze seared a path of heat clear to her heart. Before she could gulp or even blink, he took her elbow and began guiding her from the hall, but he stopped short after just a few paces.

"Hellfire and damnation," he snarled, catching her beneath the knees and sweeping her into his arms, holding her tight against his mail-clad chest as he carried her from the hall and up a winding stair.

Not the stair tower to her bedchamber, but a darker one, dank and cold.

A little-used turret, poorly-lit and reeking of the sea, its ancient, age-worn steps accessing several even lesser-used passages. Including the one he'd follow to his trysting place with the other men. Just as she'd then take another, by-most-souls-forgotten, route to her quarters.

That was the plan, anyway.

And so he paused on the first landing, easing her to her feet, but not releasing her. Instead, he pulled her closer and slanted his mouth

over hers in a thunderous kiss. She gripped his shoulders, clinging to him, not wanting him to release her.

But, of course, he did.

The night's deeds couldn't unfold unless he left her and rode away into the darkness, across the mainland moors.

"My sorrow that I must leave you," he said, sounding as if he'd read her thoughts. "Especially here," he added, caressing her back. "The truth is, I haven't the belly to see you to your bedchamber and not stay."

"I understand."

"I am glad, but it pains me all the same." He pressed a kiss to her forehead, then pulled back to look at her. "Upon my return, I shall carry you to your bed as a proper bride deserves. That I promise you."

Stepping away from her, he caught her hand, bringing it to his lips for one last kiss. "I will see you sometime on the morrow, and with fine Keith cattle in tow."

Caterine shook her head. "I know you seek more than beef for our table," she spoke plainly, letting her words and the lift of her chin dare him to deny it.

He didn't, and her stomach clenched. She touched the steel links of hauberk, felt the thick layer of toughened leather beneath.

"You are wise, my lady wife," he said then, the look in his good eye telling her more than his words.

He rode out expecting battle.

Or another ambush.

And the knowledge sent her heart plummeting to her toes. "Will you return?"

"Did I not just tell you so?"

"Aye, but—"

"Sweeting." A slow smile spread across his face.

A confident smile.

"I always return," he said, leaning down to kiss the tip of her nose. "The saints wouldn't allow otherwise."

Then he turned away and was gone.

Her man of steel, experienced and able-armed, vanished like a wraith into the shadows before she could question him further.

She waited until his footfalls faded before she turned and walked away. And with each step she took, she prayed.

For the successful execution of whatever it was he truly planned to do.

For the safe return of his men upon its completion.

But most of all that, once again, the saints would smile on Sir Marmaduke Strongbow.

Much later, in the windy dark of the still-moonless night, Sir Marmaduke, those men he trusted, and one craven snake he didn't, drew rein on a steep hillside high above Sir John's English-held Kinraven Castle.

The stronghold's walls rose dark and proud above the far shore of a long and narrow loch, an endless expanse of low, rolling moorland spreading out behind.

Smooth, grassy hills.

Prime pastureland dotted with a large number of slow-ambling darkish *lumps*.

Keith cattle.

The finest beef to be had within a three-days ride.

"Here?" Sir John kned his horse through a patch of thick-growing gorse bushes to reach Marmaduke's side. "Did you not hear me? There-"

"We've stopped in the right place," Marmaduke returned, ignoring the man's agitation. "Nay worries."

"Bah!" Sir John scowled and thrust his arm toward the distant loch-head where Kinraven raged up through the mist. "There on yon grasslands is where the cattle graze."

"Ah, well." Marmaduke followed Sir John's pointing finger across the night-blackened waters. Some lights still glimmered in Kinraven's narrow slit windows and shadowy forms could be seen moving about on the parapets.

"You are full mad if you think to find even one bullock roaming this hillside," Sir John argued, hot-voiced.

"Some would say you are mad to speak thus." Sir Ross turned on the dispossessed Scottish lord. "There are men who have lost their tongue for less," he added, drumming his fingers on the hilt of a dirk thrust beneath his belt.

The other two Highlanders rode closer, menace glittering in their narrowed eyes. James urged his horse between them, his own face tight with anger.

But not at Sir John.

James stared past the lot of them to the black specks scattered the length and breadth of the distant lochshore.

"Devil's bones," he cursed, frowning. "It boils my blood to know how long my people have gone to bed with nothing but fish and seaweed in their bellies."

He blew out a hot breath. "They are all there, our entire herd," he seethed, glancing at Marmaduke. "Do not tell me we have come all this way to search for one bullock on a wooded hillside when so many are within easy reach?"

"One is all we need this night, though two would serve better," Marmaduke gave back with the calm he'd learned in years of battling demons. "Be of patient heart, my friend. We will retrieve the others soon enough."

If we rode down to fetch them now, we'd find more waiting for us than bullocks and mist.

Sir John snorted. "You'll find naught but scrub and brush here."

"Think you?" Marmaduke met his haughty stare, then dismounted. Untying his rolled oxhide from the back of the saddle, he looked over at Sir Alec. "Tell Sir John where you were two nights ago."

"Poking about this very ridge is where I was," Alec furnished, dropping to the ground and reaching for his own oxhide. "Looking for bullocks and swine."

He shook out the somewhat tatty skin, then slung it round his shoulders. "Saw more than enough cattle grazing through the gorse hereabouts, but no swine."

He tossed a grin at Sir John. "We're hoping to catch one tonight, though."

Irritation flashed across the lord's face.

"Then let us have done with this foolery and begone from here," he snapped, dismounting as well. "Why you wished me to accompany when you refuse to heed my advice about where to best employ such thievery—"

"Thievery?!" In one smooth motion, James leapt from his saddle, closing the short distance between them with long, heated strides.

And nary a stumble or hitch.

Marmaduke turned away to hide his smile.

The Highlanders did the same.

Behind them, James railed at his father's friend. "How can you dare utter such a word when Kinraven lies occupied before you? If we were to retake its walls this night, would you call that thievery, too?" he raged. "Where is the difference?"

Swinging back around, Marmaduke found James gripping Sir John's arm, and appearing a full head taller than just moments before.

Clearing his throat, he intervened. "My good men," he said,

purposely using the word *men*, “your bellows will give warning to any lying about these hills in wait for us.”

“Lord save us!” Sir John exploded, jerking free of James’ grasp. He whirled on Marmaduke. “First you’d see us skulk about with oxhides on our backs, now we are to be set upon as well?”

“Perhaps I am of a mind to hear that from you,” Marmaduke challenged him, swirling his own oxhide demonstrably about his shoulders. “Are de la Hogue’s men about? Or was the ambush only planned for yon grazing ground?”

He indicated the nearest end of the loch its night-bound waters visible at the base of the steep hillside. “Perhaps down there, the place where the track narrows so much it’s scarce possible to ride two abreast?”

“You *are* mad.” Sir John’s hand flew to the hilt of his sword. “A baseborn son of-”

“And you are a dead man if my suspicions prove true.” Marmaduke seized him by the neck of his hauberk, hefting him off the ground before he could draw the blade.

“Be glad I have enough honor to wait until I am certain,” he added, releasing him.

Panting, Sir John rubbed his throat. He glowered at Marmaduke. “That shall cost you-”

A rustling in the gorse bushes cut him off.

Thrashing noises, and the shriek of drawn steel as each man whipped out his sword. Each man save Sir John. Red-faced with anger, he stood glaring at the gorse and hawthorn thicket whence the ruckus came.

A disruption greeted with amazement and tension-cutting smiles when its source lumbered from the shadows.

A bullock, and as fine a one as they come.

“Odin’s balls!” Gowan lowered his blade and grinned at the great beast. “He is fat enough to feed every soul at Dunlaidir and in the village, too.”

But then the wind carried other sounds to their ears. More rustlings, only this time accompanied by an ominous chorus: the jangle of bits and bridles, the chinking of armor, and the muted clapping of iron-shod hooves on damp ground.

“To horse!” Flinging down the oxhide, Marmaduke vaulted into his saddle. “Swords!” he yelled, his own already aloft, its well-hewn blade gleaming in the darkness.

“*Cuidich’ N’ Righ!*” his men roared the MacKenzie battle cry, their bold shouts rising above the ever-louder rumble of drumming hooves. “*Save the king!*”

At their cries, and the whinnying of the nervous, sidling horses, the

bullock plunged wild-eyed into the underbrush. In the same instant, a host of mounted knights burst out of the trees and all chaos erupted.

Sword-swinging riders thundered forward, circling Marmaduke and his men, their blades flashing silver against the pale gray of the mist.

With a calm control the hot-blooded Highlanders lacked, Marmaduke pushed up in his stirrups, his sword raised high above his head and waited as the knights charged forward in a swift, furious attack.

The instant the first assailant came within striking range, he brought down his blade in a deadly arc, smiting his opponent with such shearing ferocity he near sliced the wretch in two.

“Strongbow! To your left!” one of his men warned, and he swung round to deflect a vicious swipe from the side.

Undaunted, this new challenger hauled out for another slashing strike. Their swords met with a loud, jarring *clank*, the bone-rattling force of the clash shooting up Marmaduke’s arm.

He blocked the next jabbing thrust with the flat of his own steel, sending the other to the ground with sheer brute strength.

Sir Alec appeared at his side, his great Highland brand already dripping red. “There are more,” he shouted over the din of clashing steel. “A sea of the bastards streaming out of the woods.”

Blinking to clear the stinging sweat from his good eye, Marmaduke shot a quick glance toward the edge of the clearing.

Alec was right.

A veritable tide of steel-girt horsemen swarmed onto the hillside now. They barreled forward to hem Marmaduke and his men into the middle of the hellish pandemonium by the sheer press of their greater number.

“In mercy’s name,” Marmaduke breathed, and hoped the saints looked on.

“Ho, lad – my ax!” Sir Gowan’s cry rang out somewhere to his left, the urgency in the Highlander’s voice chilling Marmaduke’s blood.

He jerked round to see Gowan toss his battle-ax to James. His sword gone, James Keith grappled with a helmeted knight, valiantly attempting to fend off the man’s slashing attack with his shield.

His breath rasping, Marmaduke stared across the chaos, his heart plummeting when the ax sailed past James’ reaching fingers.

James himself let out a cry of savage rage at the miss and, his face a dark mask, he raised up and brought down the hard edge of his shield onto the sworder’s extended forearm, striking with such smashing fury the man’s arm-bone snapped with a sickening *crack*.

Letting loose of his blade, James’ opponent toppled from his horse, his shrieks of pain swallowed by the unholy din of clashing and

clanging steel.

But he'd no sooner hit the ground before a second assailant hurtled toward James, his blade already drawn back for a killing blow.

"Mother of God!" Marmaduke dug in his spurs, but Sir Ross, much closer to James, tore through the slashing steel at a thunderous speed, his huge Highland sword extended before him like a lance.

"*Cuidich' N' Righ!*" he cried, reaching James first and skewering his attacker before the man could finish his deadly sweep.

Without pausing, Ross heaved the body off his crimson sword and pressed on the join Marmaduke and Alec at the center of the fray, James hot on his tail.

Drawing together in a tight phalanx, they fought on, the ear-splitting screech of blade sliding along blade, a deafening accompaniment. The stench of blood fouled the air, filling their lungs with its metallic sweetness with each drawn breath.

A bit apart, Gowan stood tall in his stirrups, windmilling his Highland two-hander in such a wicked manner, hardly a challenger dared near him.

And when one did, the burly MacKenzie felled each such fool with a single, viciously arcing swipe – and a smile on his broad, thick-bearded face.

Then a shrill cry rent the red-hazed air, louder and more agonized than all before. Marmaduke whipped around to see Sir John, far from the center of the fighting, crash to the ground, the whole left side of him, a sea of crimson.

As was the dripping blade of the English knight who'd slain him.

Too stunned to even blink, Marmaduke stared across the chaos, wholly transfixed. He swiped the back of his arm across his brow and watched as Sir John's riderless horse bolted into the night.

Sir John's bloodied body, having gained momentum from the violence of its fall, rolled down the hillside, leaving a red-stained path in its wake.

"If that isn't beyond all," Ross panted beside Marmaduke, his own heaving chest well splattered with blood.

But not his own. "So we erred."

"God's mercy, don't speak it," Marmaduke cut him off, instinctively lifting his sword to repulse yet another attacker, hot bile rising so thick in his throat he could scarce breathe.

His suspicions about the older Scotsman lashed at him as furiously as the man-at-arms closing in on him. Swerving in his saddle, he avoided the man's swinging blade, but not the biting sting of his own shame.

All the rage of the night, and the greater swell of his guilt, flooding him with renewed strength, he swung back to face the sword.

As if the man had glimpsed the very devil in Marmaduke's own face, he tried to wheel away, but, with a roar of outrage, his cool broken at last, Marmaduke drew back his sword arm and slew the knight with one great, downward stroke.

You are a dead man.

If my suspicions are true...

A dead man.

For the rest of the long night, through all the bloodletting and cries, Marmaduke's own words rode his back.

A constant companion, a leaden weight on his honor.

And a greater foe than all de la Hogue's metal-bound henchmen combined.



ABOVE AND ALL around the hillside, a cold wind blew, its own wail echoing the moans of the dying - souls it'd soon carry from the relentless fray.

And though Marmaduke himself would've sworn the saints had deserted him at last, they'd simply sent an angel to watch over him in their stead.

He couldn't see her, but a lone woman stood beside a hawthorn tree at the edge of the fracas. Tall and dark as the moonless night, she made no sound.

Nor did she move.

Wrapped in cowed robes and swirling mist, she followed his every move throughout the fight, a world of pride in her shadowed eyes.

A wealth of love to keep him safe.

And if her own heart bore a trace of sadness, she didn't let it show.

He glanced her way once, and for a moment almost saw her, so she lifted her hand and forced a little smile. A reassuring one to let him know, this night, too, would pass. And though her time here was gone, he had many years yet before him.

Bright days and bliss-filled nights.

Her smile fading, she stared across the silence at him, lending him her comfort as best she could, marveling at his valor and strength.

As she always had.

After endless-seeming hours, the fury of the battle finally lessened, the outcome clear. With a deep sigh torn from all her yesterdays, she sent one last smile his way, then slipped into the shadows of her world once more.

One with the mist and darkness.

Until he needed her again.

“So you do believe in the Laird’s Stone?”

At Rhona’s amused voice behind her, Catherine shrieked and slammed down the lid of the iron-bound strongbox at the foot of her bed.

“Gah!” She whirled around, clapped a hand to her breast. “Since when do you roam about in the middle of the night, poking your nose where it doesn’t belong?”

“Perhaps since you’re so interested in old stones?”

“One stone, thanks be.” Catherine brushed at her skirts. “And I wasn’t peeking at it.”

Rhona folded her arms. “Then why aren’t you abed?”

“Because I’m not,” Catherine said, annoyed.

Because it will be soon be cockcrow and our men have yet to return.

Because I fear for him.

“I couldn’t sleep,” she owned, stating the truth, if not the reason.

“None of us can.” Rhona glanced into the darkness of the ante-room where, ignoring the comfort of his own bed, Leo lay curled atop Sir Marmaduke’s rough pallet.

Catherine followed her friend’s gaze, and sighed.

Until a short while ago, Leo, too, had roamed the bedchamber. He’d gone round and round, his short legs carrying him between the ante-room, the window embrasure, and, always, the closed door where he’d turn pleading eyes on its oaken panels.

Waiting for a champion.

As the long, empty hours of the night had consigned her to do as well.

“My lady...” Rhona peered at her, one finger tapping lightly against her chin. “Can it be you could not sleep for the same reason I, too, am restless?”

Catherine drew her bed-robe more securely about her shoulders. Frosty morning air slipped through the shutter slats, the cold making her shiver. “There are often nights when sleep eludes me.”

“I know you,” Rhona persisted. “You fear for the Sassunach.”

“I fear for them all.” Catherine clutched the edges of her bed-robe,

nerves damping her palms.

Rhona stepped closer, a knowing glint in her eyes. "You care about him, as I do James. Your worry sent you to examine the Laird's Stone."

"How can I not care for him?" Catherine started pacing. "He's a gallant and noble-hearted man. But I was not examining the Laird's Stone. I was putting away his ring."

"Putting away his ring?"

Lifting her hand, Catherine wiggled her bare fingers.

"Why?" Rhona's brow pleaded. "You said you care for him."

"I do." Catherine lowered her hand. "I honor him too much to wear his ring so long as I cannot give him my heart."

"You've already done that."

"Nae, I have not." The denial sounded hollow even to Catherine's ears.

Troubled, she went to the darkened window embrasure and wrenched open the shutters. Needing, welcoming, the blast of icy air that rushed into the room.

Naturally, Rhona followed her. "If you have not yet given him your heart, then I am a virgin."

"My heart is and shall remain my own," Catherine insisted, sinking onto the window seat. "I have told him so."

Rhona's brows shot up. "He believed you?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Catherine adjusted the bed-robe over her knees, clung to the frankness that protected her from folly.

And pain.

"Oh, mercy." Rhona tightened her lips, shook her head. "This is not good."

Catherine sighed. "It's not as bleak as you make it."

"How so?"

"He doesn't need my love. He shall have all else I can give him," Catherine said, stunned by the pang of longing that ripped through her just thinking about him.

Rhona nudged her. "What 'all else' do you mean? Admiration? Respect? Companionship?"

"So long as he is with us, aye. All those things and more."

"Such as?"

"You know what I mean." Catherine pulled a small cushion onto her lap, clutched its edges. "I am not yet a crone. I have feelings, even if they've been frozen all these years. Perhaps it's time for a thaw?"

"Did you say that to the Sassunach?"

Catherine hesitated. "I told him I should like to explore desire."

Rhona's jaw slipped. "Oh, my."

"You needn't look so shocked. If I recall, 'twas you who claimed I

am in need of suchlike.”

“But, my lady, I never meant the one without the other.” Rhona dropped to her knees, reached for Catherine’s hands in a strange mirroring of how her new husband had knelt before her in this very alcove.

How easily he’d made her want him.

Rhona squeezed her hands. “I’d so hoped you’d find love and desire with your champion.”

“With an English champion?” Catherine amazed herself with how little that mattered now.

“I do not believe you are still bothered by his Englishry,” Rhona pressed her.

“I am not,” Catherine didn’t deny. “It is the English blood of other men that plagues me, as well you know.”

Their ghosts and the stains they left behind.

Tamping down a sigh, she stared out at the thick sea mist drifting past her windows.

A barrier as impenetrable as the gateway to her heart.

With surprisingly little effort, she concentrated on the physical yearnings her champion had stirred in her, and tried to banish the cold other English knights had put in her soul.

That proved a more difficult task.

Far from chasing her cares, her eyes burned and a tear spilled down her cheek.

“Botheration,” she snapped, both furious and sad.

“Have you told him?” Rhona tightened her grip on Catherine’s hands, massaged her cold fingers. “Does he know how they used you before your first husband’s eyes, then slew him before yours?”

“Not in so many words.” Catherine kept her gaze on the swirling mist. “But he is wise enough to have guessed. I told him I have not known much physical pleasure and would enjoy exploring such intimacies.”

At her companion’s silence, she straightened her spine. “I am older now,” she said, suddenly weary, the sleepless night bearing down on her. “The prospect of mating no longer terrifies me as it once did. Other women seem to enjoy coupling. Perhaps I might as well.

“Now, after all these years.” She turned back to her friend. “I am willing to try.”

Rhona’s brow pleated. “That won’t be enough. He will want more.”

“He agreed, so you needn’t worry.”

“Agreed to what? Bedding you?”

“Aye, and why shouldn’t he?” Catherine frowned. She’d thought Rhona would understand. “He is lusty. Even I can tell, by his kisses. He’d dally with any woman willing to air her skirts.”

“Nae, nae, nae,” Rhona said, standing. “Not any woman. Have you not seen the way he looks at you?”

“At times.”

“Nae, more than that.” Rhona pressed both hands to her heart. “He is always watching you. He’s besotted.”

Caterine shook her head. “You are a good friend, and do not want to hurt me,” she said. “Just because he expects, even wishes for nuptial pursuits, doesn’t mean he desires me.”

“Oh, but he does,” Rhona said, as if she’d read Caterine’s doubt. “That is why he will be pleased you fancy him in such a way. He is sore smitten with you. Only you.”

“Nae, I do not believe so.”

“Why?”

“He agreed to more than the pleasure part,” Caterine said, and the deepest reaches of her heart quickened in objection to the other half of their understanding.

“What agreements?”

Caterine drew a breath. “That any intimacies we share shall be pure physical acts, nothing else.”

“And you believed him?”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“I don’t know, but...” Rhona fingered the ends of her braids. “If you deny him your heart, you will have only carnality. And that, my lady, is what I enjoyed with the garrison men. It brings swift pleasure, but fades as quickly.”

“You keep your heart from James.”

“I do not keep my heart from him, he does,” Rhona said. “He can claim my full affections the day he so chooses, and it is my hope that will be soon.”

Smoothing her skirts, she glanced heavenward and sighed. “We have not yet come fully together, though he knows I am experienced. That part of me, I do keep from him.” She looked back at Caterine, her gaze dreamy. “For now.”

“So you do want to...er, ah... lie with him.”

“Oh, aye.”

“I am ready for that, too,” Caterine admitted. “I am weary of feeling cold and empty. But I want a husband at my side, not just in my bed. I need him to stand for Dunlaidir, to love these walls, this land, and serve our people, to protect them always.”

Rhona’s face lit with a smile. “That’s what champions do, is it not?”

“So legends say.”

“Then you needn’t worry.”

“I hope not, but I shall take further measures.” Caterine stood,

clasped her hands before her. "Something I would never have trusted myself to do."

"What?" Rhona's smile deepened. "Something wicked?"

"Perhaps, but not in the way you are thinking," Catherine said. "And I am not sure I even have the nerve. Still..." She paused, her mind racing back years, remembering. "If I hope to fire my champion's dedication to Dunlaidir, I am willing to seek help from any source imaginable. Even one so unlikely some would say I'm addled."

Rhona's smile faded. "No one would ever call you addled."

"They might if I followed the advice of a half-mythical Highland crone who runs about wearing red plaid shoelaces."

"Devorgilla of Doon?" Rhona stared at her. "She's more than a myth. She doesn't exist."

"Aye, she does." Catherine dropped back onto the cushioned window seat. "I met her once or twice many years ago. She's quite real, and so is her magic."

"Truly?" Rhona glanced at the door, and then leaned forward. "What was she like?"

"Tiny and black-garbed except for her red plaid laces, and she's ancient, gnarly and grizzled, though her eyes are bright blue and twinkly," Catherine remembered. "She visited my home, Dundonnell Keep in the Western Highlands, when one of my sisters was preparing to marry."

"The groom was a Mackintosh of Nought territory in the Glen of Many Legends," she explained. "Kirsty fretted for months, worrying about living so far from home, loving our part of the Highlands as she did."

"Did Devorgilla spell the groom to move north, away from Nought?" Rhona guessed.

"Nae," Catherine said, "but she told Kirsty of a way to secure the old ones' blessing of a union, and how honoring them would make her feel as one with her husband's land, so creating a powerful bond."

Rhona blinked. "A bond with the Glen of Many Legends, or the husband?"

"I was young and don't recall exactly. It was late and I wasn't even supposed to be in the hall. I only overheard snatches of Devorgilla telling Kirsty what to do. I believe the bond was between the couple and the land, not just one or the other."

"I see," Rhona said, sounding skeptical. "So what is it that must be done? Run around naked beneath a full moon or something?"

"Or something, aye."

"I thought so." Rhona stared at her, then shrugged. "The Nought Mackintoshes are known to be wild men. It's said they're descended from Viking Beserkers."

"That's true," Catherine said. "But that's nothing bad. They're fierce fighters, so are good at protecting their own. Kirsty and Hugh are happy. They're well settled at Castle Nought. They have four sons, last I heard."

"So the spell worked?"

"It's not a spell." Catherine shifted on the window seat. "It's a way to give thanks to the ancients, and the land all Scots love to the roots of their souls."

"Sir Marmaduke isn't Scottish," Rhona reminded her.

"But he loves Scotland," Catherine said, knowing he did. "That's enough. And..." She drew a long breath, released it slowly. "Dunlaidir needs us."

"So you'll be doing this *something*?"

Catherine nodded. "I will try, anyway."

"Does it include nakedness?"

"It might," was all Catherine would admit. Truth was, it included nakedness and more.

If she could do it.

"Faith and mercy..." She pressed a hand to her breast, doubts rising.

Rhona's frown became a look of concern. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You didn't." But Catherine wondered if she could ever be so bold, so abandoned, as Devorgilla's land-blessing would require. "Nothing troubles me that will not pass," she said, hoping to soothe her friend.

"Will you sleep this night?" Rhona circled back to the reason they were both awake at this late hour. "Are you as worried as I am?"

Catherine gulped back her own trepidation. Unlike her worries about following the advice of a half-mythic crone some claimed was older than Scotland's rocks, this fear sat thickly in the back of her throat, hot and burning, its portent frightening.

Steeling herself against a dread she didn't want to ponder, she turned again to the sea. Still blanketed with fog, nothing but its ceaseless crash against the cliffs hinted at its nearness.

That, and the cold, brine-laced air.

"We needn't worry," she said then, the words coming more from the swirling mist drifting past the window than from her. "They will soon return, and unscathed."

A strange but welcome conviction she simply knew to be true.

As if an angel had whispered it into her heart.

Chapter 36

Late the next afternoon, strong winds drove sleety rain across Dunlaidir's bailey, the gloaming dark just beginning to set in, as Sir Marmaduke and his bone-weary companions finally clattered into the stronghold's deserted inner courtyard.

No trumpets sounded, no cheers rose to greet them. Not a single cry of joy for the fat bullock and equally plump milk cow they led behind them.

Far from it...

Nary a soul stirred, and a deep quiet – almost a death pall – hung heavy in the chill air. They found an eerie place and moment, shrouded in silence, with no wish to be disturbed.

As if the whole castle slept.

Or mourned.

From the corner of his good eye, Marmaduke caught Sir Alec crossing himself. Sir Gowan, the most rough-hewn of his men, appeared ill at ease as well, his gaze flitting about the empty bailey.

"They will not know we are back," Marmaduke spoke at last, swinging down onto the rain-dark cobbles. Looking round, he shoved back his mailed coif, then ran a hand through his hair.

The others remained silent, their faces grim.

Then Sir Ross made the sign against evil and began mumbling prayers to the ancients, the old gods of their pagan ancestors.

"There's no cause for concern," Marmaduke said, secretly wishing he believed his own words. "This gloom is not for man or beast, that's for sure."

No one answered, and he understood.

An odd foreboding rode his back, too, but he quelled his own disquiet long enough to school his features. Daring his friends with his show of calm to reach inside themselves and recover their own.

"I thought they'd come flying down the stairs the moment we rode in," James said, frowning at the outer stairs.

Cold and wet, the stone steps rose to an equally bleak landing where the hall's entrance door remained unmoving, its thick, iron-studded strength closed against them.

"I would've sworn they'd have waited by thon door," James declared, dismounting.

Marmaduke clapped a hand on the younger man's shoulder. "I'd have enjoyed a warmer welcome, too, my friend." He forced a smile. "Come, let us tend to these beasts, wash away the muck, and then we shall see what keeps our ladies."

He broke off at the sound of pounding footsteps.

Black Dugie's.

The great bear of a man ran toward them, his eyes round and staring, his chest heaving when at last he reached them.

"Dia!" the smithy cried, eyes bulging. "We thought you were dead. Every last one o' you."

"Dead?" Gowan snorted. "Dead weary and ready to drown ourselves in ale rather than this slashing rain, but no' dead as you mean," he said, swiping his wet forehead with the back of a burly arm.

"It'd take more than a handful of sword-swinging Sassunachs to put MacKenzies to earth." Sir Alec strode up to them, his own bedraggled and blood-stained appearance making him look every inch a dead man.

"But..." Black Dugie gaped at them, doubt still all over his broad face.

"We may look dead, but I assure you we are very much alive," James said, speaking to the smithy, but still staring at the hall's closed door. "Where are our ladies? Why aren't they here to greet us?"

"Because they will be busy preparing a fine reception for us in the great hall." Marmaduke slung an arm about James' shoulders, and hoped he spoke true. "Be glad they-"

"Oh, nae, that isn't what they're about," Black Dugie said, something in his words drawing the attention of all. "They're huddled at the high table, trying to come up with a way to pay for perpetual prayers for the lot o' you."

"Perpetual prayers?" Marmaduke's astonishment couldn't have been greater. "Did they have so little faith in our return?"

Black Dugie shuffled his feet. "My pardon, sir, but how could they think otherwise when Sir John told us you'd all been killed?"

"*Sir John?*" Marmaduke stared at the smithy, incredulity whirling through him.

It couldn't be.

They'd seen the older Scotsman slain.

"There must be some mistake." Sir Ross frowned, pulled on his beard. "Sir John cannot have told you aught. The man is dead."

He glanced at Marmaduke, then back at the smithy. "We saw him cut down."

“Then his wraith rode in here all a-fire to lie to us.” Black Dugie pointed to the hall door. “He’s up there now. Trying to console your womenfolk.”

“Bluidy hell!” one of the Highlanders growled, his fury accompanied by the *zing* of metal as he whipped out his sword.

“But...” Gowan puzzled, his rain-flecked brow creasing. “We saw him killed.”

“Nay, my friend,” Marmaduke said, comprehending at last. “We saw him fall from his horse and roll down the hill.”

“Aye, to ride back here and announce our demise,” Ross added, and Marmaduke agreed.

“So it would seem,” he said aloud, reaching for his own steel. “Come, men,” he said, already striding for the keep. “Now we have certainty.”

It was time to corner a swine.



THE INSTANT DUNLAIDIR’S great oaken door crashed open, Catherine whirled around and immediately choked on a sob. Her heart bursting with relief, she stared in amazement at the men striding into the hall’s entry arch.

Icy wind swept in with them, gusty draughts that set the nearest torch flames to dancing, the wildly flickering light casting weird shadows over their granite-hewn faces.

“A wonder!” Rhona reached across the high table to grip Catherine’s wrist. “Lady, they live,” she gasped, her voice tremulous, her joy and wonder matching Catherine’s own.

Her throat too tight for words, Catherine wrapped an arm around the little dog on her lap, clasping him hard against her as she sent silent prayers of thanks heavenward.

Her champion – her new husband – towered over the other men, contained anger pouring off him, its intensity palpable from clear across the hall. Most important, he stood and he breathed, every glorious inch of him very much alive, as were they all.

Their brows dark in the smoky torchlight, they strode forward, advancing on the high table without a word of greeting. Jaws set and hard-faced, their outerwear caked with mud, the mail beneath, smeared with blood.

Black Dugie came with them, by no means as sore-battered, but equally wet and solemn. He also clutched a long-bladed dirk in his hand.

“God be praised!” Catherine stood, finding her voice at last. The whole of her body trembled even as relief spiraled through her. Heat

pricked her eyes, blinding her to the menace on their faces, the oddity of drawn steel in her hall.

"A miracle," Sir John said beside her. "By Lucifer, who would have thought-"

"Do not worsen your treachery with more lies," Sir Marmaduke cut him off, speaking loud enough for all to hear, his voice as cold and deadly as the gleam of his sword.

He fixed Sir John with a long, hard stare. "Come," he said, beckoning to him, "you mention Lucifer, let us hasten your journey to his side."

"Dear God, you are witless," Sir John scoffed, the words dripping scorn.

Ignoring him, Sir Marmaduke glanced at Catherine. "My regrets, lady, that I must blacken the name of a family friend, but this man is a traitor," he said, and Catherine believed him for the truth stood on his face, and in her heart.

"He is Sir Hugh's man," her husband accused, his expression growing colder by the minute, darkening with the first scowl she'd seen him wear.

"Is that not so?" He turned to the men standing close beside him, and without hesitation, they nodded agreement.

Even James.

Black Dugie, too.

"Lies!" Sir John shot to his feet, his face scarlet. Glaring at Marmaduke, he lifted his hands. "A liar, and no true knight for you challenge an unarmed man."

Angry murmurs rose at that, growing louder as grumbles and curses sprang from one table to the next. "Unarmed?" one of the garrison men called out. "Sore straits easily remedied!" Coming forward, he slapped his own blade full-length on the high table. "Take it, and fight us! Now."

"Aye, if you have the spine," another snarled.

"Show us your honor – or did it go the same way as your courage?" someone else shouted from deeper in the hall.

"Baseborn worms," Sir John hissed, not even glancing at the weapon. Instead, he snatched up his cloak. "I will not listen to such insults," he added, swirling the mantle around his shoulders. "Perhaps once this foul night has passed, the good folk within these walls will have regained their senses."

His head high, he started forward, not looking left or right until he strode past Marmaduke. Then, with astonishing speed for a man of his years, he threw back his cloak and spun around to lunge at Marmaduke's back, a wicked-looking dagger flashing in his upraised hand.

Someone's scream – her own or Rhona's – filled Catherine's ears as, with even greater agility, her husband whirled to face Sir John, his fingers closing around the older man's wrist.

The dirk dropped to the rushes, but the forward momentum of Sir John's own spinning whirl plunged him against the sharp edge of Marmaduke's sword. He cried out as a bold slash of crimson appeared across his middle – a true wound this time, and a fatal one.

His howl of pain muting into a horrible gurgling sound, he stared at his own red-flowing death, astonishment in his bulging eyes as he sank to the floor.

Chaos and uproar filled the hall as men thrust back from their places at the long tables, rising almost as one, to press forward and crowd around Sir Marmaduke and the soon-to-be-dead noble.

Catherine and Rhona clung to each other, looking on in horror as Sir Marmaduke cast aside his sullied blade, and then knelt beside Sir John's prone figure.

"A well-deserved end," someone called out above the din.

"A blackheart done in by his own false move," another agreed, the angrily spoken words echoing off the weapon-hung walls.

In contrast, pathetic moans, scarcely audible, issued from Sir John's gray lips, his eyelids flickering as he tried to focus on the men peering down at him.

Biting back his anger, Sir Marmaduke cradled the man's head. "Unburden your soul before you breathe your last," he said, lifting his voice to cut through the confusion. The growing swell of heated mumbles and darker slurs, the yapping of his lady's little dog.

"Speak," he tried again. "All listen."

When Sir John remained silent, Marmaduke glanced up at the men thronging near, raised a hand to still their grumbles. Then he reached for Sir John's blood-drenched tunic and lifted its hem.

The wound, an angry red slit just beneath the earl's ribs, was his only injury. Not even a bruise or scratch marred the whiteness of his flesh.

"But he was smeared with his own blood," Gowan observed. "We saw-"

"Not his own blood." Ross spat onto the rushes. "The bastard sullied himself a-purpose, wanting us to think he'd been cut down."

"A sack of chicken or pig blood beneath his tunic, most like," Marmaduke agreed.

"Foul bastard," Ross snarled.

"It scarce matters now." Marmaduke looked up at the battle-hardened Highlander, signed for him to hold his tongue. "He is leaving us."

"Good riddance," Sir Alec growled.

“My lord of Kinraven,” Marmaduke began, lowering the shirt, then leaning down to speak into the dying man’s ear, “your treachery has cost you all. We would have helped you win back your home had you but asked.”

Sir John’s lips moved, but no words, no explanation of his duplicity poured forth.

Only a welter of pink-flecked froth.

“N-never lost Kinraven-” A mere rasp, pushed from lips by death itself.

“Never lost Kinraven?” That from James. He stared at Sir John’s waxen face, his own paling. “How can that be? All know-” He broke off at a warning glance from Marmaduke, and an elbow in the ribs from Alec.

Sir John’s eyelids flickered again and he met James’ astonishment as best he could. “’Twas Dunlaidir he wanted...all along... p-promised to leave Kinraven untouched if...if...”

--If you’d help him gain Dunlaidir,” James finished for him, his face darkening when Sir John gave him a silent, agonized nod.

“Soulless craven!” James shouted, his hands fisting. “To think we welcomed him, gave him sanctuary.” Whirling away, he stormed from the hall, his long-strided gait as straight as the fine red line across Sir John’s belly.

“M-my regrets...sorry...” Sir John wheezed, his glassy-eyed stare fixed on some distant point beyond Sir Marmaduke’s shoulder.

Perhaps beyond this world.

And then he was gone, his feeble peace offered, his troubled eyes dulling, his last breath spent.

Equally troubled, Marmaduke lowered Sir John’s head to the floor, then stood. His gaze finding his wife’s, he shrugged off his cloak, and, after swirling it over the dead man’s body, he went to her.

She ran toward him, her arms extended as those in the hall made a path for her. He opened his arms as well, and waited. His courage, so bold on the field of battle, proved not quite stout enough for him to believe she’d fling herself into his embrace.

But she did, and in that precious moment, the world tilted beneath his feet.

The glory of her acceptance, her joy at his safe return, felled him with a far greater blow than any English steel could ever deliver.

His heart swelling so quickly he could hardly breathe, he wrapped his arms around her, letting her cling to him, marveling that she did, blood-sullied and grimed as he stood before her.

“My lady, but I love you,” he breathed the words against her temple, too overcome to care that she stiffened upon hearing them.

Setting her from him, he clasped her face with his hands and

touched his forehead to hers. "Do not say it," he murmured into the warm silk of her hair, "just calm yourself, and let me hold you."

He slipped an arm beneath her then, lifting her to him before she could object or ruin the moment.

The most precious he'd had in many long years.

"Yon wretch was not one of the dragons I meant to slay for you," he said, carrying her from the hall. "I believe it is time for us to challenge the true ones."

"Oh?" She leaned back to peer at him, astonishment in her sapphire eyes. "Are you not?"

"Aye, my love, I am too weary even for that fair bliss," he answered honestly, wishing it wasn't so.

Wishing desperately it wasn't so.

"But," he said as he began the circuitous climb to her bedchamber, "I've brought a fine bullock for your table, and as soon as this *true* wedding feast is past us, I shall fulfill every one of my promises."

"You are a good man," she said, her eyes shining.

"I am *your* man."

He paused to kiss her. Deeply, and with all the fierce exultation she stirred in his soul. He drew back only when the last traces of stiffness eased out of her and she relaxed in his arms, the soft sigh escaping her, enough.

For the moment.

"This night, my heart, a bath and a warm bed will suffice," he said, pleased when she didn't balk at his use of the word *bed*.

Bed, not pallet.

"I ask only that you let me hold you," he said, resuming their climb up the turnpike stair. "That, and savor your warmth."

Much later, in the stillest hour of the night, Catherine stood beside her bed and looked down at the man sleeping so soundly within its curtained depths. He'd done as he'd promised, cradling her as the stronghold quieted and night settled around them. Even so, she clenched her hands against her mounting frustration.

She wanted more than being held.

She wanted...

She didn't know. But her heart pounded slow and hard as fire glow stole across his back. The silvery ridges of his scars twisted her heart, while his broad shoulders and the well-muscled arm he'd slung over a pillow, tempted her to touch him.

To heed the desire burning so deep inside her.

She shivered as feelings stirred. A tight, breathless need as sweet and rare as the clear and lustrous night stretching beyond her bedchamber's arch-topped windows.

A glittering expanse, as endless as the sea.

A magical night.

For once swept clean of clouds and mist, and studded with countless twinkling stars. Cold and distant each one, but winking down at her with encouraging smiles.

Still, dare she awaken her husband and tell him she desired more than sleep this night? That she hoped he'd join her in an ancient, pagan rite practiced by her Highland ancestors as easily as they strode the heather-covered hills?

Her wish, a rite that, though once sacred, might draw an amused smile, or worse, reproach?

Not sure how he'd respond, she glanced across the room to the shadowy window embrasure. With the winter sea and icy north wind making a more traditional blessing impossible, leastways not advisable, the alcove with its sweeping views of sea and sky would have to suffice, and would, she was sure.

Yet...

Could she be so bold?

The stars winked...yes.

Her pulse quickening, and before her nerve left her, she cast another look at her sleeping husband, then crossed the room and claimed one of the two bench-style seats carved into the stone walls of the window alcove.

“S-sir...” A mere squeak.

Not loud enough for a mouse to hear and certainly not bold.

She drew a deep breath, prepared to try again. “*Sir!*”

That, he heard.

Never had she seen anyone exit a bed so quickly.

Or recover his wits as swiftly.

“Thunder of heaven!” Chest heaving, he stared at her. “Sakes, woman, I thought we were under attack.”

Nae, but my courage is fleeing, her heart confessed.

She said nothing. How could she with his hard-muscle body, so magnificent in the moonlight, minding her of more than her wish for them to be as one with the wild northern night, the cold wind and crashing sea.

“My lady, that was not wise.” He came toward her, at ease with his near-nakedness, unaware of her intent.

Stopping in front of her, he reached for her hand, and then raised it to kiss her knuckles. “I’d not alarm you, but it is dangerous to stir a man so abruptly. I could have hurt you when I leapt from the bed.”

“I wanted you to see the night sky,” she said, not looking at the stars at all, but at his groin, his manhood still swollen from sleep and pressing against the thin linen of his braies.

“You are not looking at the sky,” he said, releasing her hand.

Meeting his gaze, she tried not to squirm, tried even harder to ignore the awareness crackling between them.

Did he feel it, too?

Something told her he did.

When his gaze flickered over her, she was sure of it. Praise be he’d kissed the top of her hand, for her palms were hot and damp.

“So, sweeting...” He tossed a look out the nearest window, then turned back to her. “I have seen the night sky, mist-chased as it is. Shall we not return to bed?”

“Can we sit here for a while?” she asked, forcing a light tone. “I could not sleep.”

“I am not surprised, given the length of the day, and how it ended.”

“Please...” She smoothed the bed-robe over her knees. “Let us not speak of Sir John and his treachery. I would simply rest a bit.” She gave him a hopeful smile. “Enjoy the quiet, and whatever the night might yet bring.”

“As you wish,” he said, lowering himself on the opposite facing

seat. "Shall we admire the stars?" His voice held a trace of amusement. "Leastways, the ones kind enough to peek at us from behind the mist."

"Even if we can't see them all, they are still there." Catherine waited, expecting him to laugh.

Instead, he reached for an old, folded plaid and spread it across his legs, getting comfortable.

"Those who have gone before us do the same," he said, sounding almost like a Highlander. "We see them when they wish it. Other times, they are cloaked in mystery, hidden from view."

"Can it be, sir, that you are Scottish?" Catherine smiled a little, lifted a brow. "You speak like the men of our hills."

"Ah, well." He studied her, his good eye twinkling. "Perhaps I've spent too many years in the Highlands? Breathed in too much peat smoke? Or maybe" – he gestured to the nearest window arch – "too much of your infernal, ever-present mist?"

"I suppose that would do it." Her smile widened, a place deep inside her noting how easily he cut through her defenses. "You are a Highlander in all but blood."

"So I have heard, my lady." His own smile flashed. "I take it as a great compliment."

Catherine's heart warmed. "I was quite serious."

"So am I."

"Then, as a near-Highlander..." She summoned courage, nerves flickering through her. "Have you ever heard of the far-famed Highland cailleach, Devorgilla of Doon? A half-mythical crone who runs about wearing..."

"Black boots with red plaid shoelaces?" he finished for her, chuckling. "To be sure, I've heard of the great lady, as she is known. She visits Eilean Creag Castle now and then, often accompanied by her little red fox, Somerled."

Catherine blinked. "You've met her?"

"I have, yes."

"Linnet never mentioned her coming to Eilean Creag," she puzzled. "I would think she'd have sent word. A visit from Devorgilla would be quite an honor for any household, even one as great as Clan MacKenzie."

"Not so long as Duncan MacKenzie is laird," her new husband said, serious now. "He is not fond of the crone, swears her witchy ways are too uncanny."

"Truth is..." He sat back, the twinkle returning to his eye. "I suspect he fears she'll turn him into a toad. He makes himself scarce whenever she sets foot on Kintail land."

"Linnet was with me the few times I met her," Catherine told him,

remembering. "Once, we'd traveled to the wild lands of Nought in the Glen of Many Legends. Our sister, Kirsty, married a Nought Mackintosh," she went on, sharing a bit about their visit, but not mentioning the land-blessing Devorgilla suggested to Kirsty.

When she was sure she'd babbled way too much, and seemed unable to stop, her champion leaned forward and placed a hand on her knee. "You didn't mention Devorgilla just now because of a long-ago family wedding," he said, proving again that, somehow, he could peer into her mind. "Why did you ask if I knew her?"

"Because..." Catherine's chest tightened, the nerves that had been only flickers, now rushing through her like a strong, cold tide in the iciest northern sea.

"Because," she started again, "Devorgilla believes freshly married couples should honor the old gods and the land. She recommends a blessing ceremony that gifts the pair's union with all the strength and benevolence of the ages, protecting them always."

"I see." He nodded.

He didn't throw back his head and laugh.

He did reach for her hand, lacing their fingers. "You wish to perform this blessing ceremony?"

"I do," Catherine blurted, her heart pounding. "I believe it would be most beneficial for us."

"Then we shall do it," he agreed, making it sound as if she'd offered him a mere cup of ale, and not an ancient pagan ceremony that, despite his good humor, would cause many to scoff.

"What is required?" he asked, his brow creasing only slightly. "Dunlaidir's great stone cliffs are fierce in any weather, but now, all gray and fog-drenched, any land-blessing might best wait till a time when the high moors, at least, are less frozen?"

"I have heard tales of such rites, and..." His voice held the slightest hint of regret. "The first time we join, sweeting, I'd not have you sprawled across hard, icy ground."

"The old gods won't mind if we avoid freezing ourselves to frost-coated stones." Catherine stood, dared to let her bed-robe fall open, aware that the thinness of her chemise hid little. "From what I understood of Devorgilla's suggestion, the couple's intent, their willingness, is all that's needed."

"Needed to what, my lady?" Her husband also stood, the lightness of his linen braies as revealing as her chemise. "What exactly must we do?"

Catherine swallowed, reached deep inside her for a boldness she wasn't sure she possessed.

"Well?" He looked at her. "Go on."

"Ah, er..." She dug her fingers into the folds of her bed-robe, drew

a breath. "We must stand unclothed and open ourselves to the elements, my lord. Our hearts wide and accepting of the land all around us, from the depths of the sea, to the richest and blackest peat bog, the last stone on the farthest moor, to the cold and racing wind, and beyond to the most distant star in the heavens.

"All that we must draw in to swirl around us, letting it wrap round and round, embracing us and steeping our souls as the years fall away and then rush in to return, blessing us as we stand to honor and give love to our ancestors and all those who once walked here, and called this place their own."

"I understand," he said, sounding serious.

And the old gods help her, she believed he truly was.

"Then shall we begin?" she asked before her courage fled.

When he nodded, she slipped out of her bed-robe, letting it fall to the floor.

He stepped closer then, slid his arms around her. "Must we speak?"

"No." Catherine leaned into him, her heart beating ever faster.

"What I just said should be enough."

"If we are open to such a blessing?"

"That is my understanding," she confirmed, her mouth going dry as he tightened his embrace, pulling her so close hardly a breath could slip between them.

"We are not yet unclothed," he reminded her.

"I know."

"You said we should be." He lowered his head, nuzzling her neck.

"It would be a shame to diminish the blessing."

"It would."

"Then..." He released her and stepped back, quickly removing his braies. He kicked them aside, lifted a brow. "Shall I assist you?"

"Nae." She shook her head, amazed by her daring. Surprised even more when, almost acting on their own – or perhaps guided by powers she rarely thought of, but wouldn't deny – she found her hands undoing the laces of her chemise, then letting it drop to pool around her ankles.

Almost certain she could feel the power of the old ways already surging into her, she stepped out of the discarded undergown and opened her arms.

"Come, then," she said, the strong, steady voice surely not her own. "We must stand at the unshuttered window and embrace."

"That is all?"

"I believe so," she said, feeling much like a living flame as he followed her instructions, holding her before the windows, so close to the night's racing wind and swirling mist.

And as they stood there, the stars seemed to speed toward them,

glittering above the night-glossed sea, yet appearing near enough to touch as the night's wonder beat through them, binding them in carnal union even as the land, sea, and sky merged, claiming them as one.

"Do you feel it?" His voice came as if from a great distance, a thrumming in the magic around them, rather than words murmured against her hair, just above her ear.

"I do," Catherine agreed, half afraid to speak.

Her husband kissed her neck, his breath soft and warm, so welcome against her skin.

"Do the old gods require a mating?"

Catherine's heart stopped, desire and nerves sweeping her. "I- ... ah..."

"Nay, worries, sweeting," he spoke again, his voice still low, but huskier. "There's another way to please your pagan ancestors and ourselves."

A tremor rippled through her, the knowledge that a mating was indeed expected.

"I do want the blessing to work."

"It shall," he said, again seeming to know her mind.

Then, before she could guess what he intended, he lifted her and settled her onto one of the window seats, placing her so that she perched on its edge. As he did so, the sea wind swung round and rushed in to circle the alcove, glittery mist sweeping in with the cold. The air filled with the scent of brine and wet stone, before the magic sped away again, leaving them alone in the night.

At once, a deafening calm descended as the guttered wall torches flickered back to life, and Catherine's eyes rounded as her husband dropped to his knees before her.



"I BELIEVE your old gods have left us, my lady," her husband said, smiling up at her.

"I feel that, too," she managed to admit, aware of pleasurable flutterings deep inside her. Still, if the ancient land-blessing was done, all that remained was...

"I know we must join," she said, gripping the edge of the window seat. "But..."

"Never you mind, precious lass," he murmured, holding her gaze. "We shall mate properly later. For now, just open your legs and relax."

"Open my legs..." She repeated the three words, stunned to realize the pleasurable stirrings she'd noticed had swept even lower and now tingled in a long neglected place. A sensation that turned even more

pleasing when he gently urged her knees wider apart and began lightly stroking the soft skin of her inner thighs.

"Oh, my," she gasped, her blood rushing in her ears.

"Indeed, and that is good." He eased her legs even wider. "Now breathe deep and simply feel."

"I will try."

"You can," he told her, cupping the whole of her, massaging her with his palm, then trailing one finger slowly up and down her intimate center.

"Does this please you, lady?" He caressed her intently, tracing the length of her with slow, lazy strokes. "Shall I keep touching you this way?"

"Aye," she gasped, her voice ragged. "*Please.*"

"Then open your legs as wide as you can," he encouraged her. "There is no shame, my dearest. We are one now, joined by your priest and your ancients. I am yours, and you are mine. Wholly, and forever. And so, I wish to see and touch all of you. Here, and now, in this special night."

"I want that, too," she said, and another little gasp escaped her.

Then, to Marmaduke's delight, she scooted forward until her bottom rested on the very edge of the seat, her hips rocking in a silent plea more eloquent than any spoken words.

"Be still," he said, pressing his hand flush against her silken heat. "You will enjoy this more if you remain perfectly still, and open."

"Ahhh..." she gasped, but then shut her eyes, finally letting herself relax.

Seeing her capitulation, he reached down to grip himself with one hand and used the other to pleasure her. He still traced the center of her, but now explored her more thoroughly, gently rubbing, then stroking and circling until she cried out her need.

His own release near, he tightened his hold on himself. As discreetly as possible, he began pulling, easing his own need, even as he stroked her ever more deliberately. Then, his own ease breaking, he circled one finger over her, his focused attention giving her the same shattering fulfillment.

"Dia," she gasped, and fell back against the seat cushions.

His own body spent, Marmaduke slid his arms around her hips and rested his head against the soft warmth of her inner thigh. The sleek heat of her proved such a temptation, he nestled closer until his cheek rested against her.

Aroused anew, he touched his tongue to her.

The merest flicking at her sweetness.

Simple touches of the tip of his tongue to her tender flesh. So light he doubted she noticed, but intoxicating to him.

Indeed, the lady slept.

As would he, soon.

But first he wanted to hold tight to the bliss he'd found. A sated smile, wondrous in the peace and the contentment it brought, tugged at the corners of his mouth.

And all because his precious new wife wanted to show him the night sky, enjoy an ancient pagan rite.

In turn, he'd taken her to the stars, which is exactly where she'd needed to go.

And what a glorious journey it'd been.

Many miles away, on the other side of Scotland, a new day

dawned bright and crisp. Nary a ripple marred the glassy surface of Loch Duich, and a fine dusting of frost coated the mountains hugging its shores. Even Eilean Creag's stout walls gave themselves quiet and unthreatening in the clear, blue-white light of the icy cold morn.

But inside those walls, the stronghold's master shook with fury, and prepared himself to roar at any fool, man or beast, who dared to happen across his ire.

His hands clenched at his sides, Duncan MacKenzie, the Black Stag of Kintail, stood in his empty hall, frowning darkly at the sweetly scented layer of newly-strewn floor rushes, sheer roiling murder in his heart.

"*Fergus!*" he shouted, full aware none but the scrawny shouldered, impertinent seneschal bore responsibility for the hall's tidy appearance.

For his bed had disappeared from the raised dais, and his fair lady wife was likewise absent.

"Hie yourself in here, you bandy-legged he-goat, lest I-"

"Lest you what, laddie?" The object of his wrath bristled from the shadows of the screens passage.

One of his favored hidey-holes.

And where he'd no doubt been lurking simply for the pleasure of spying on Duncan's distress.

Taking his time, the old man shuffled forward, his scraggly-bearded chin thrust out in defiance. "Lest you shout these walls down with your bluster?"

"*Where is my wife?*" Duncan put all the dread in his heart into the shouted words.

His concern for her, his *fear*, working him into a fine, fuming rage, he aimed a pointing finger at the raised dais which, once again, held the innocently mute high table.

"What have you done with my bed?" he roared, not even trying to contain his fury.

The seneschal folded scrawny arms and glowered back at him.

And said not a word.

Duncan glanced up at the hall's vaulted ceiling and inhaled deeply.

At length, and in somewhat better control of himself, he turned his attention back to his grizzle-headed steward. "The bed – and my lady – were here before I left to make my rounds not an hour ago," he said, his deep voice calmer.

A little bit calmer.

But not enough to pry answers from Fergus.

Duncan heaved a great sigh. "So-o-o, Fergus, you've restored notable order to the hall," he said, trying to imitate a certain one-eyed lout's winning manner with servants by spouting praise and resting a hand on Fergus' knobby shoulder.

"And I see you've had the last of Strongbow's frippery hauled down to the boat for our last trek to Bal-"

Breaking off, Duncan narrowed his eyes at the recently emptied front section of the hall. Not a single stick of furniture or stack of prized gewgaws blocked the entrance.

Everything was gone - piled high in Eilean Creag's largest galley to await transport.

A sick feeling in the pit of Duncan's belly joined the tightness banding around his ribs, comprehension washing over him in cold and hot waves.

And so he tore his gaze from the spotlessly tidy entrance area and looked back at Fergus.

The quivering of a muscle in the old man's jaw told the truth: Duncan's bed and his lady were, even now, happily ensconced on the galley, jammed in amidst the remainder of Strongbow's household wares and nonsense.

Goods that awaited the journey to Balkenzie Castle.

In defiance of his orders.

"Bluidy hell!" Duncan released all his savage fury in one ear-splitting roar.

"'Twas her own doing," Fergus dared to extract himself from the dark deed. "You ken how persuasive she can be, and she swore it was time-"

"*Time?*" The word curdled Duncan's blood. "Time for the bairn? And her planting herself and the wee one in a boat?"

"Nae, lord." Fergus shook his head. "Time for the Sassunach to return."

"And she thinks to await this glorious day at Balkenzie?" Duncan's head would soon split. "Tell me you didn't encourage her in this foolery?"

"She said if I didn't help, she'd find some other way to get there."

With great effort, Duncan fought back his temper. "And the bairn?"

For the first time that morn, the old seneschal smiled. A fearsome sight as his gap-toothed grin was not for the faint-hearted.

“Speak, man.” Duncan scowled at him. “What is with the bairn?”

“The bairn, a fine and healthy what-she-told-me-but-made-me-promise-not-to-tell-you, will be born at Balkenzie,” Fergus declared, his chest swelling at being the bearer of such privy news.

“She saw the whole of the birthing with her gift,” he added, the sheen in his eyes revealing how pleased he was that Lady Linnet had trusted him with her secrets. “You will soon have a braw new bairn, laddie.”

Duncan’s shoulders sagged even as his heart swelled with joy. A braw and strapping babe, lad or lassie, was well worth the short boat ride across Loch Duich.

And certainly worth looking a fool for ignoring his own orders.

“Then, come, you old buzzard,” Duncan conceded defeat. “Let us not keep the lady waiting.

And so Duncan MacKenzie, dread laird of Eilean Creag, and his fool-grinning seneschal, made their way down to the stronghold’s jetty for the passage across the loch to Sir Marmaduke’s Balkenzie Castle.

But not before Duncan wiped his own silly grin from his face, and replaced it with a dark frown worthy of his formidable reputation.

Chapter 39

Sometime in the hushed stillness before dawn, Marmaduke woke

to find a slender thigh, sleek, warm, and smooth, draped over his legs. His new wife's head rested his shoulder, her unbound hair spilling free in glorious disarray, the silken strands caressing his chin – her scent, a hint of fine summer days, delicate and light, a gift to stir his senses.

And to set his pulse to racing.

Other parts of him stirred as well. Darker, more beastly urges, for still another part of her pressed against him. Unashamedly close, infinitely soft, and deliciously hot.

His lady wife's feminine heat.

Remembrances of their land-blessing ceremony in the night, of then holding and stroking her, swept through him like a blaze of liquid fire.

Whatever traces of sleep still clung to him, took flight, scattered with startling ease by the searing sweetness of waking with her crushed so intimately against him.

But even as his blood roared, he took equal bliss in the simple stirring of her breath against his shoulder.

Both pleasures, the carnal and the tender bonding, blended to weave an inescapable cordon around his heart. Silken chains of passion and promise, tying his soul to her, and filling him with untold contentment.

A precious and rare joy he wasn't ready to relinquish.

To that end, he slanted a look through the half-opened bed curtains. The coming morn hadn't yet spread beyond the deep alcove of the window embrasure.

Equally pleasing, the rest of the room still lay in cold and silent darkness. Ample time remained of the early hour's calm for him to relish her soft warmth wrapped so sweetly around him.

A comfort he'd savored throughout the small hours after he'd gathered her into his arms and carried her, sleeping, from the window seat.

And somewhere in the splendor of the night, something magical had happened. Perhaps a residual blessing from her cherished old

gods?

He didn't know.

Either way, the wonder of it closed a door on the hurts and regrets of days long past, and banished the emptiness of countless lonely nights.

A moment, a touch skin-to-skin, her supple length stretched out beside him, and all his demons had fled.

Or so he could almost believe.

Hope.

A wild and giddy joy he'd never thought to find again.

But he had.

And the miracle of his good fortune filled him with awe. Grateful, he drew a deep breath of the cold morning air, and allowed himself a slow smile.

One that glowed bright and true deep inside him and warmed him to his toes.

He loved her.

The words spoken in passion on the turnpike stair hadn't been frivolous, born of the moment.

He'd truly given her his heart.

He, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow, Duncan MacKenzie's champion knight, friend and mentor to many men, staunch defender of women and children, and soon-to-be lord of Balkenzie Castle, had fallen irrevocably, maddeningly, and wondrously in love in again.

And he'd done so with every fiber of his being, every face he had: the handsome one wrested from him so long ago, the scarred one blighting all his waking hours, and the as-yet-unknown one he'd wear in years to come.

Indeed, he loved Catherine, and the enormity of his discovery made him want to leap from the bed, run to the windows, and shout his jubilation clear to the distant horizon.

That she yet lay beside him, beckoning with the satiny warmth of her skin and the shining glory of her golden hair, opened up horizons of a wholly different nature.

Ones he burned to explore.

And now was as good a time as any to continue what they'd begun in the mist-swept magic of the night.

And so...

With all the skill he'd mastered, he smoothed his hand along her side in a light, barely-there caress. Her blue eyes flew wide just as he splayed his fingers over the curve of her hip.

She gasped, the sweetness of her sleepy-eyed confusion going straight to his heart. "W-what are you doing?"

"Slaying more of your dragons," he lied.

Slaking his fiery need was closer to the truth.

"Last night, after your ancients left us, we only tossed out our first challenge to them," he said, caressing her alluringly rounded bottom in a manner designed to put her at ease, and to enflame her blood to the same sizzling-heat as his own.

"And now?"

"Beginning this morn, we shall launch a full assault," he promised, nuzzling his cheek against her unbound hair, pressing kisses into its glossy length. "But you must wish their demise, too, my lady."

He grazed his lips along the smooth line of her neck. "Do you?"

"Did I not prove last night that I am ready to have certain dragons banished?" she gave back, now fully awake. "That I am freely open to our bond?"

"We stood naked together," she reminded him, angling her head to give him better access to her neck. "Unclothed and laid bare before the old gods, this wild and precious land, and our own good selves."

"So we did."

"And did you not begin then? Slaying dragons?" Her words came on a soft, sensual sigh. "I believe you did. Your touch pleased me well. You-"

"Pleasuring you with my fingers is not what I meant," he said, not mentioning the fleeting touch of his tongue. "There is more to carnal loving, as I hope to convince you," he did say. "We have many delights to share."

The deep smoothness of his voice sank into her, flowing around and through her, seductive as his feather-light kisses to a sensitive spot just beneath her ear, tantalizing as his fingers gliding ever so wickedly over the rounds of her bottom.

"All of your dragons will be dealt with soon. That I assure you," he vowed, nipping her ear.

"And it is the dragon that dwells here-" He slipped his hand between her thighs and, very slowly, traced the tip of one finger along the center of her heat. "-that I burn to engage this moment."

"I will not stop you." Catherine sighed, his intimate touch as breath-stealing in its intensity as she remembered from the night. His caress ignited a needy ache in the deepest part of her belly; a weighted tension potent enough to send waves of delicious tingles rolling all through her.

She supposed this was the urgent, twisting birth of true desire.

And the wonder of it ripped through her, wild, insistent, and glorious.

"You are a fine dragon slayer," she said, parting her thighs without encouragement – a silent plea for him to keep touching her. "These are beasts I want you to battle."

"I will do that, and more," he told her, the magic of his touch making her feel almost ale-taken.

She touched his face, traced a finger along his jaw. "You have already done much for me."

"Lady, I would give my life for you."

"My champion," she said softly.

Then, almost not recognizing herself, she parted her thighs a bit more - seeking, welcoming his bliss-spending caress. "You ignite fires I didn't know existed," she breathed, her voice now thick with passion, her eyes a deeper shade of blue.

She looked at him, her lids now half-lowered, and heavy with arousal. "I have never known such abandon. *This* dragon you have already slain, my lord," she said, arching her hips into his touch. "I wish to continue exploring these pleasures for so long as you remain with us."

Her last few words dashed icy water all over him. Somewhere deep in his soul, shards of shock and dread splintered away from the tight, spinning joy he'd taken in touching her so lovingly.

He started to object, to warn he would leave soon, and her with him, but she'd begun gliding her hands over his chest, and before he could protest, she slid them lower, brushing against the one place he couldn't easily control.

He did sit up, his blood roaring. Then he circled her wrist and lifted her hand from his abdomen. A signal not to let her fingers wander in that direction again.

Not this moment.

Such intimacy would come later - when he was certain she'd welcome all of him, including his soul and heart.

"Caterine..." He looked at her, unsmiling now. "Do you truly think I will leave without you? My lady, you are my wife. And I am not a stripling whose attentions - and passion - can be trifled with, cast aside on the morrow. I am your husband - the man who loves you, and it is too late..."

Trailing off, he stared at her hand, the bareness of one particular finger shattering the last of his hopes, his belief, that she'd come to care for him.

He seized her hand, staring at her empty ring finger, cold bands of doubt sliding round his heart, and throwing open its gates so his demons could march right back in.

Did you truly think she wanted you for than a moment's ease, you blighted beast? they taunted.

'Tis your skill in pleasuring she desires, not your fool heart...or your ring! they shouted with glee, laughing even harder as their jeering deflated the remnants of his ardor.

Closing his ears to them, Marmaduke tugged the bedcovers more securely over the evidence of his dismay. Then he schooled his features into his best mask of indifference, and met her gaze full on.

"I knew the ring would not fit," he said, his voice rougher, more agitated than he would have wished.

Secretly hoping the heirloom's large size was indeed the reason she'd removed it.

"I've brought you a fine gold chain so you can wear the ring around your neck until we return to Balkenzie," he rushed on, not giving her a chance to deny his explanation.

Silently praying she wouldn't.

"Once we are home, I will have the ring altered for you. I meant to give you the chain after the second wedding feast, but I shall fetch it now."

"Nae." She grabbed his wrist when he made to stand, the regret on her face, unsettling him as little else could.

"I do not want a gold chain," she said, and his heart almost stopped. "I removed the ring because I do not wish to wear it." Her honesty dropped a heavier weight on his crushed spirits with each word she spoke.

"I honor you greatly," she said, her straightforwardness prancing hot foot all over his soul. "But my own honor will not allow me to wear your ring. Not on my finger, not on a chain around my neck."

Marmaduke swallowed past his dignity. "And why not?" he managed in a voice scarce his own. He had to know.

"Because I care too much about you to do so," she replied, a whole troupe of demons leering at him over her shoulder.

Without a word, he stood.

Heedless of his nakedness. Uncaring if she and all the sons of Beezlebub laughed at his plight.

"You care for me too much to wear my ring?" He forced himself to push her, the gruffness in his voice a thin shield for his vulnerability. "Fair lady, I do not comprehend your logic."

"Upon my word, I do care. Far too much." She pushed to her feet as well, a bed cushion held before her as she slipped past him, making for an iron-bound strongbox at the foot of her bed.

"Your ring rests here," she said, indicating the large chest. "I put it there because I will not do you the injustice of claiming it so long as I cannot give you my heart as freely as I'd share my body with you."

"That is the way of it." She lifted her chin, stared right at him. Not from coyly lowered lids as a more saucy maid would have done, but with the level-eyed look of a woman who never lied.

"You are too worthy a man for anything less," she said... or so he thought.

He could barely hear her for the hoots and howling of his demons. They'd returned en masse and from the racket they made, it sounded like they'd brought a whole regiment of reinforcements with them.

Too worthy a man for anything less.

The words sat heavy in his heart as, a good while later, Marmaduke stood high on Dunlaidir's ramparts. Gripped by freezing winds, he gazed out across the open sea. Slate-gray and cold, its endless expanse stared back at him.

Uncaring of his woes, or those of any man, its ceaseless roar muffled by pale, low-hanging clouds and the first snowfall of winter.

Too worthy, she'd said.

Too blighted, his own doubts amended, for they, too, had rushed back to torment him.

And so he clenched his jaw against the biting wind, the bitter irony of his life. Sir Marmaduke Strongbow, once the sought-after ladies' man, dashingy handsome, his mere kisses coveted, stood here now, suffering the injustice of having hands skilled enough to make an angel sigh, passion that never failed to please, yet a face too marred to win a woman's heart.

His own lady wife's heart.

Turning into the gusty wind, he let the swirling whiteness cool the frustration searing his cheeks. His left cheek – the scarred one – still sticky with Linnet MacKenzie's ragwort salve.

Her *beauty treatment*.

A fool's delusion he'd recently discovered.

He hadn't even known he'd smeared on as much as he had until Ross had commented on it, blessedly mistaking its yellow coloring for a smudge of grime.

His lips twisted in a bitter smile.

The only smudge on his face was anything but grime, and couldn't be removed as easily.

Couldn't be removed at all.

Drawing his fur-lined cloak tighter about him, he peered down at the little golden-brown dog that, for a reason he couldn't fathom, had tagged along with him to the battlements. The wee creature pressed its small body against his boots, and met his stare with round, unblinking eyes.

A gaze as frank and assessing as Catherine's.

"Well?" Marmaduke spoke above the whipping wind. "There is nary a spot of beauty in this ravaged face is there, my little friend?"

To his amazement, Leo cocked his head and he would've sworn the dog's brown eyes held a wealth of understanding.

No, not understanding.

Pity.

"That is not the answer I'd hoped for," he said, bending to scoop the dog into his arms.

He nestled the shivering creature inside the warmth of his cloak, taking some small comfort when Leo stretched up to lick his chin. "Not bothered by my scar, little man?" he pushed past the burning tightness in his throat.

He didn't want pity.

Nor canine adoration.

Though the latter proved decidedly more palatable than the dog's usual fare of snaps, growls, and piddles.

Squirming in his arms, Leo wiggled himself ever deeper into the folds of Marmaduke's cloak, his little-dog-groan of satisfaction once he settled himself, a clear indication of the true reason for his sudden show of affection.

The wee beastie was merely cold and sought Marmaduke's warmth.

His mantle's protection from the swirling, wind-driven snow.

Much as his lady sought comfort from him as well, succor of an entirely different nature.

A dark scowl settling round his heart, and his wife's clever pet clutched tight in his arms, Marmaduke turned away from the sea to face toward Kintail and Eilean Creag.

Toward home...Balkenzie.

Too distant to be seen even by fair weather, but there nonetheless. And tugging on his heart more fiercely in this moment than in all the long weeks since his departure.

Waiting for him, and his bride, whether she chose to go or not.

And so...

He would make her love him.

Accept him.

He'd do so even if he had to employ every sensual trick, every artful touch and kiss, he'd ever learned. Secrets taught to him by court harlots at an early age.

Unfair measures, to be sure, but bold and rousing enough to fire any woman's blood.

For the first time since he'd left Catherine's bed, a spark of hope glimmered inside him, for in his lady's quest to explore desire, she'd

innocently given him the means to seize that which she thought to keep from him.

An ignoble path to a lady's affections, but the only course she'd left him.

And she'd never know that, with each sweet, carnal sigh he wrested from her, each tumultuous release, he'd be stealing back a piece of her heart.



SEVERAL NIGHTS LATER, the brightly burning flames of countless torches lit Dunlaidir's crowded great hall. The golden light cast a cheery glow over the wedding feast revelers, though several discreet alcoves and corners remained murky enough for those wishing more amorous entertainments than gorging, guzzling, and the singing of bawdy songs.

The rich smells of wood-smoke, heavily spiced wine, and roasting meats lent a festive air to a hall long filled with naught but shadows and the too-familiar reek of braised seaware and roasted gannet.

Amidst this tumult and din, Catherine sat straight-backed at the high table. She trusted the throng of celebrants, all in high good humor and sating themselves on fine Keith beef and rivers of cool, heady ale, found themselves too occupied to notice her flaming cheeks.

Or if they did, she hoped they'd credit her flush to the overcrowded hall's smoky warmth and wouldn't peer close enough at her – or her husband – to glean the real reason for her discomfiture, for the heat searing her cheeks couldn't compare to the raging burn spinning low in her belly.

A fire put there by her husband's stroking fingers - a casual caressing of her beneath the table linens, through the folds of her skirts, and executed with such expertise only sheer force of will kept her from squirming all over her chair.

But, while hidden from general view, *he* knew of her edginess, and its reason. And the beast clearly reveled in tormenting her.

Tremors of exquisite sensation, highly inappropriate for the moment, spooled through her over and over again. She slid a look at him. An agitated look that left him wholly unfazed.

Confident and proud, he sat calmly beside her, conversing with his men, offering her prime morsels of roasted beef from their shared trencher or sipping hippocras with clear appreciation - all the while gentling slow, lazy circles across her most sensitive places.

"All the gods thunder!" she hissed, snatching the wine cup they shared. She took a healthy gulp, let the rich, spiced wine flow down

her throat. She also thanked the heavens his questing fingers couldn't breach the cloth of her skirts.

"Is something troubling you, my wife?" He glanced at her then, a devilish light in his good eye, and, for just an instant, flicked the tip of his middle finger over the heart of her womanhood. "You appear distressed."

"I am fine," she managed, her thighs tensing in reaction to the jolt of pleasure ripping through her at the single, fleeting touch.

"Then all is well." He gave her a slow, knowing smile, then turned back to his men.

And, wanton that he was making her, she parted her legs in a shameful admission she enjoyed his lusty ministrations, and craved more.

Even here, in her seat of honor at the high table.

Comprehending at once, he nodded imperceptibly and implemented more simple flickings to his slow, sensual caresses of her beneath the table linens.

And she let him.

Indeed, she would have cried out if he stopped, for over the past few nights, she'd learned the potency of pleasure.

Her champion had proven himself well-versed in extracting pleasure from the mysterious spot that seemed to be the center of all carnal bliss.

Leaning toward her then, he brushed his lips against her temple, using the kiss to whisper in her ear. "When we're retired to your bedchamber, I shall kiss you there," he said, just as he pressed one fingertip hard against her.

Very deliberately, he began rotating the finger - only to lift it away before her need could shatter in the fierce release she now knew came swift on the heels of such concentrated rubbings.

Kiss me there? She almost gasped the words aloud, the thought almost pushing her over the edge.

Surely she'd misunderstood.

"Nay, you did not mishear me," he murmured, his smile turning wicked. "I shall devour you all the night through and do not even think to try and stop me."

Caterine disguised her gasp with a generous amount of hippocras, swallowing the potent wine so quickly, her eyes teared.

She struggled not to cough as she dabbed at her cheeks with the corner of her linen napkin and scanned the faces of those crowded round the high table. Relief filled her when no reproachful glances stared back at her.

No one seemed to have seen or cared.

At this late hour, many of the carousers were already sleeping off

the heavy meal, their heads resting on folded arms, their snores blending with the general ruckus.

Others, including the young knight, Lachlan, and even James, had taken themselves off to join the hardiest of the celebrants dancing with great vigor at the far end of the hall.

And some, her husband's hard-bitten Highlanders, argued over the matter of Sir Hugh and what to do about Kinraven.

"-and after he's captured and confesses, we return to Kintail?"

Return to Kintail.

The words, spoken by one of the MacKenzie Highlanders, ripped through her sensual haze with the ease of heavy hands rending silk. She listened as others echoed the first man - all wanting to know when they'd be home again.

Her heart hammering, Catherine glanced at her husband, her braw champion. Seemingly unaware of her concerns, he met his men's query with ease.

"By Yuletide, my friends," he assured them, lifting his wine cup to underscore the promise. Not that any such firmly spoken words needed embellishment. The portent behind them slid down Catherine's spine like chips of ice.

As if sensing her ill-ease, he withdrew his hand from beneath the table and touched the backs of his fingers to her face, gently smoothing a few strands of hair from her brow.

But for all his tenderness, the set of his jaw told her his planned return to Kintail was a matter he would not bend on. Not even for the breath-stealing intimacies he lavished on her behind her closed bedchamber door.

The knowledge - that he would leave - sluiced through her with a cold certainty as real and physical as his touch. She looked away, not wanting him to see her own steely resolve, her determination to keep him at her side.

At Dunlaidir.



A SHORT WHILE LATER, Catherine peered across the smoke-hazed great hall, her gaze reaching the circle of whirling, energetic dancers just in time to see James stumble. Unable to keep up with the dance's strenuous pace, he tripped and fell face-long to the floor.

Barks of laughter accompanied his plight as dancers leapt over or sidestepped his sprawled form. Her heart twisting, she looked on as he pushed to his knees in the thick layer of newly spread rushes, his face dark, the cruel taunts of a few ale-headed revelers reminding her why she must convince her husband to stay.

Across the table, unaware of James' embarrassment, Father Tomas coughed discreetly. "My good men," he began, turning to Marmaduke and his knights, "how will you persuade Sir Hugh to concede defeat?" he wanted to know. "His arm is long and his treachery great."

"Sir John's was the blackest treachery," James ground out, limping up to the table. He drew back his laird's chair with a painfully loud scrape, and sank heavily into its oaken embrace. "The man was an adder."

"I've no doubt it was he who fired an arrow into the back of the miscreant who took aim at Strongbow and my stepmother the afternoon of the wedding," he said, nodding stiff thanks to Eoghann as he plunked another steaming platter of roasted meat onto the table. "He surely thought to still the man's tongue before Black Dugie could haul him before us."

Murmurs of agreement and hearty nods circled the high table.

James dabbed at his brow, his fury at Sir John's duplicity clearly vexing him more than losing his footing in the dance. "The man broke every rule of hospitality long held sacred in this land, and all the while he consorted with the devil behind our backs."

"And now he sups at the horned one's own table," Sir Ross commented, helping himself to a long draught of ale. "His friend Sir Hugh will be joining him there anon lest he is wise enough to ride south on a very swift steed."

"Hugh de la Hogue has learned he cannot whisk aside the good folk of Dunlaidir like a swarm of pesky midges," her husband said, placing his hand over hers on the table, idly kneading the tops of her fingers as he spoke, her heart quickening at his touch.

He glanced at her then, a knowing glint in his good eye, before he turned back to his men.

"Either he has made a wise retiral to England by the time we return to Kinraven to fetch the remaining Keith cattle or he can prepare himself to make peace with his God," he said, pouring himself a generous portion of hippocras. "A sad prospect, for I doubt the good Lord will greet him kindly."

"And Kinraven?" That from James.

Caterine waited, noting the hardening of her husband's features. As she watched, he took a sip of his wine, exchanged telling glances with his men.

"Kinraven will be no more," he said. "Naught shall remain but soot and ash. Allowing it to stand will only invite another of the same ilk to take Sir Hugh's place."

"And how shall you turn as well-watched a stronghold as Kinraven into a burning pyre?" Caterine masked her concern with note of pique.

What shall I do if – this time – you fail to return? Her heart

demanded.

"I do not like the worry on your brow," he said, looking right past her lifted chin and into her heart. "You've no need to fret yourself for I shall return without the merest scratch. We all shall."

"But..."

"Never you worry, my sweet." He brought her hand to his lips and placed a kiss in the center of her palm. "We shall take Kinraven as we've taken other such occupied holdings in even more turbulent times of the past."

"How?"

Calm as always, he released her hand and chuckled her under the chin. "With stealth."

"Stealth, a dark night, and well-sharpened blades," the bearded Sir Gowan tossed out, sitting a bit forward and looking as if he'd relish the fight. "That, and enough good men to scale the walls and turn the whole keep to a burnt, blackened shell before they ken."

"Nay, my friends," her husband's objection came swift. He gave them each a long and level look. A warning look. "That will not be the way of it. We shall not sully ourselves by adopting their methods of villainy."

He raised a silencing hand at their protestations, the grumbles rising from the nearest long tables.

"The garrison men at Kinraven are no different from ours. They merely fight under de la Hogue's banner," he said, speaking loud enough to be heard by all. A calming, authoritative voice in the chaos.

He again looked from one to the other, waiting for them, and those at other tables, to still their tongues before he continued. "They will be given a choice: return to England and their families on their knightly honor never to cross the border again, or remain and die with Sir Hugh."

Silence greeted that...silence, and creased brows.

"What of de la Hogue?" Father Tomas wanted to know. "What of him?"

"I shall challenge him," Sir Marmaduke returned. "He can die by the sword, and on his feet, as a man of worth should hope to do - or within the burning walls of Kinraven as a coward."

He stood, drawing Catherine up with him. "That, good sirs, shall be his choice." He wrapped his arm around Catherine's waist. "The man has made his fate."

"And from the looks of it, you're about the make yours!" an ale-slurred voice rose from a nearby table, the ribald shout breaking the thick tension in the dais end of the hall.

Darkness slid from his men's faces as well, as, at once, all manner of well-meant jesting and bawdish hollers rose to the smoke-blackened

rafters.

“Ale and wine will flow freely late into the night,” Sir Marmaduke called out, his commanding voice lifting about the din. “Partake and enjoy.”

Then, lacing his fingers with Catherine’s, he raised their linked hands for all to see. “My lady and I have other plans, and bid you a good night.”

Catherine stood motionless beside him, her breath catching when he lowered their hands and swept her high into his arms. Gladly, she surrendered to the flickers of heated excitement rippling through her now that the long evening was about to come to an end.

Or, better said, begin.

I shall kiss you there, her champion had said.

Her worries momentarily forgotten, a tiny smile curved her lips as he carried her from the hall.

Kiss her *there*.

Devour her.

A delicious tremor rippled through her at the thought. And he’d voiced concern she wouldn’t let him.

Trembling with need even now, she sighed and began counting each step of their circuitous climb up the winding turnpike stair.

Let him, indeed.

She could scarce wait.

Chapter 41

“**W***ill you truly?*”

The three words, whisper-soft but smoldering with the smooth, dark heat of a woman on the verge of passion, ripped into Marmaduke with all the force of a howling winter wind.

Blasting not cold, but pure, molten heat straight into his loins.

Halfway down the dimly lit passage to his lady wife's bedchamber, he halted once, angling her in his arms so the flickering light of a nearby wall torch could better illuminate her face.

Not that he didn't already know what she meant.

Nor what a tempting sweetmeat she was – he'd already tasted her once, if fleetingly.

This time he meant to sate himself on her.

Indeed, he knew what she wanted with every fiber of his body, every beat of his smitten heart.

It was writ all over her.

She met his gaze full on, her excitement almost shimmering in the air between them, the lush swell of her breasts rising and falling with a rapidity that didn't lie.

The perfect bride of the beast.

“Will I what?” he spoke at last, amazed he could push the words past the tightness in his throat – the *want* coursing through him. His feelings for her, almost a living beast rising inside him, claiming every shred of his flesh and bone, consuming his soul.

“Tell me, sweeting.” He caressed her face, traced the curve of her cheek with his thumb – and waited, silently willing her to voice her desire.

She blinked, clearly delving for courage. “Will you truly kiss me there?” she finally blurted.

“Where, my love?” devils made him ask as he set off again, this time great-strided, eager to reach her quarters and the bliss awaiting them there.

Some far-thinking soul had cracked her door, and a nudge with his foot was all it took to send the door swinging inward.

“Will I kiss you where?” he prodded, crossing the chamber with

swift strides. Needing, wanting her to speak the words.

He dropped a kiss on her temple. "Here? Somewhere else?"

"You know where," she blurted then, two spots of color appearing on her cheeks. "I want you to kiss me there, where you said you would."

"Lady," he said, his voice deep, "I shall kiss you there with the greatest of pleasure, and till the breaking of dawn if it pleases you."

"It would," she admitted, meeting his gaze.

"Then let us not delay," he said as they reached her massive four-poster bed and he flung back its curtains with one hand before easing her onto the bed's edge.

A bed already occupied by a four-legged contender for her affections.

"Be gone, little man, for your lady is mine this night," he said, then snapped his brows together in his most intimidating scowl when his words had no effect.

The scowl worked.

With a grunt of displeasure, Leo hopped from the bed and toddled off to seek his own.

Some kind soul had stoked the fire and it threw off a fine reddish glow that, together with the wall torches, gave the room enough light and warmth so that his lady would be able to lie fully unclothed before him and not shiver.

He cleared his throat, his heart thudding. "Caterine, I mean to love you thoroughly this night." He locked his gaze on hers. "I wish to absorb your essence, and give you all of mine."

A union of our bodies to finish your ancients' blessing, a joining to meld your soul, heart - and now your body - irrevocably to my own.

"But first I must tell you something." He placed his hands on her shoulders, kneading them.

"Then do," she said, her eyes earnest, accepting.

He touched the coiled plaits at her ears. "Shall I unravel your hair as we speak?"

"I would like that."

"Good, then." He nodded, a bit of the worry leaving him. "Lady, you must be made aware that when a man kisses a woman intimately," he said, slipping the pins from her hair, "when he touches his tongue to her, or opens his mouth over her as I shall do to you, he becomes so enflamed, he may no longer be able to withhold himself."

"Oh." Her eyes widened, but she held his gaze. Interest, not revulsion on her face, and for that, he knew true relief.

"Do you understand, my lady?"

"Are you asking if I am ready to take you fully?"

"I am," he said, speaking true. "Until now, though duly wed, I have

only pleased you with my hands and my lips,” he explained, placing a handful of hairpins on the table beside the bed. “Once I’ve kissed you as I intend to this night, I shall want you in every way.”

He lifted her chin. “You must know that before we proceed. I am asking your consent.”

“I will welcome you,” she said, and the heat simmering in her eyes assured she would.

“Then all is well.” He smiled at her, wondered if she knew what a gift she was. “Let us begin.”

When she returned his smile, he pulled the remaining pins from her hair, allowing it to spill free in silken waves to her hips. Enchanted, he twined his hand in the golden mass, let the silky waves stream through his fingers.

Thoroughly besotting him.

He lifted brimming handfuls to his face, nuzzled his cheek against the cool, satiny skeins. “A man could lose his soul in your hair, lady, but this night, you have other charms I would explore.”

And a heart I mean to capture.

How do you mean to do that, you fool? One of his demons taunted from somewhere in the shadows.

By loving her - a softer voice gave back...beautiful and precious, but barely there. A whisper on the wind racing through the cold night beyond the shuttered windows.

He is very good at loving...at winning and holding a woman’s heart.

Better yet at giving his own.

Marmaduke wheeled toward the row of night-battened windows, his nape prickling. He strained his ears, listening hard, but heard nothing save the muffled wash of the sea and the wind’s keening echo.

And then the wind sped on to harry some other corner of the night - taking its echo and, as *she’d* meant to do, some of Marmaduke’s doubts along with it.

A chill swept down his back, but he shook it off with surprising ease, for, of a sudden, a wondrous warmth spilled through him and he simply knew he could win his new bride’s heart.

Knew he could make her love him.

And for more than his renowned skill at tugging.

He tossed that barb into the dark shadows of a particularly menacing corner - one that seemed needy of a firmly spoken reprimand.

Then, before his doubts could mass force against him again, he dropped to one knee and began removing his new bride’s slippers. “Are you ready to be loved, Catherine?” he asked, meaning anything but the physical act he was about to perform on her.

“I am ready to be kissed, aye,” came the wrong reply.

Refusing to face defeat, Marmaduke tossed aside her slippers. "And how would you like to be kissed? Shall I draw deep and fully on you?"

And how shall I win your love? his heart echoed. *Shall I batter down your defenses with a passion so fierce every resistance will be futile?*

Lifting her skirts, he began stroking her calves, the backs of her knees. "Or would you prefer barely there little licks across your sweetness? Feather-light kisses to drive you wild with bliss until you can stand no more?"

Or shall I win you with a tender wooing? Ply your heart with the lightest of touches until it melts into my waiting hands?

"What would you prefer?" she asked, her heart tripping at the intense way he looked at her.

As if he meant so much more than the mere words.

And as if the unspoken ones already worked some strange and heady magic on her.

"I prefer a little of both," he said, his only falsehood being that he preferred a great deal of both.

And so...

He stood, drawing her to her feet. "Take off your clothes, Catherine," he said. "I would see all of you."

"As you will," she agreed, exquisite anticipation eddying through her as she untied the lacings of her bodice and eased her arms out of the sleeves. That done, she let the gown shimmy to the floor where it pooled around her feet.

Her chemise quickly followed.

Seemingly at ease with her nakedness, she stood before him, her arms at her sides. "And now?"

"Now, my lady, we begin the journey I hope we'll enjoy every day of our lives."

“**A** *journey*?”

Caterine glanced across her bedchamber at the still-unshuttered windows of the alcove, her gaze on the cold, dark sea. “Now is no time to venture anywhere. Winter is coming, and-”

“You misheard me.” Marmaduke reached out and trailed his fingers over her just-bared breasts. “The journey we begin this night is exploring each other.

“And much as I’d like to, I shall not spend much time enjoying your breasts just yet,” he said, his heated gaze making the place between her thighs throb with a heavy, pleasing warmth.

“Still, I will tell you they are lovely.” He slid his hands beneath them then, cupping, lifting, and weighing the soft, full rounds. “Prolonging one’s release can heighten sensual pleasure and, much as your breasts enthrall me, I want to kiss you elsewhere tonight,” he said, the words, his touch, sending hot streaks of tingly sensation across her tender parts. “I burn to see you senseless with desire.

“But first you must relax,” he said as he eased her onto the edge of the bed. “We will achieve that with the hidden delights here,” – he slid one finger between her legs, traced its tip along the center of her – “this place, the heart of your womanhood. The part of you stirring me so fiercely this moment.”

“I stir you?”

“And how.” He met her gaze, scarce hearing her through the haze of his arousal. “I am so besotted, I would pull down every star from the heavens and place them at your feet if I could – all for the privilege of just standing here with you, seeing you thus, and breathing in the glory of you.”

She blinked. “Oh, my.”

“Would you stir me more?” He looked at her, waiting. “Will you do whatever I ask?”

“Aye.” She wet her lips, scarce able to breathe for the pounding need consuming her. A hot, tight spinning deep inside her that would surely burst any moment. “What should I do?”

“Open for me, Caterine. Show me your sweetness. Let me gaze

upon you.”

“Is this desire? I believe so...” she gasped, spreading her knees.

Fully, unashamedly, and as wide as she could open them.

“Kiss me there, as you promised.” A half-choked voice rasped the plea. “I cannot stand it...” She squirmed on the bedsheets, the mind-numbing, carnal excitement almost blurring the room around them, everything seeming to recede, leaving only sensation.

“Hold what you are feeling.” His deep voice came as if from a great distance, and she glanced up to find him staring at her, his face dark with passion.

Keeping her gaze, he knelt between her thighs. “I shall touch my mouth to you very soon, my sweet. Just keep your legs open.”

He began caressing her. Giving her light, questing touches, then quick, barely-there strokes along her center.

“Do you enjoy this?” he asked, rubbing, massaging her now. “Does what I am doing make you feel good?”

“Aye,” she admitted, unable to say more for the torturously sweet pleasure winding so hotly through her.

“That is as it should be.” He smiled, his hand still plying her. “I am going to tell you what I’ll be doing to you before I do it, so listen carefully. Speaking such things aloud is stirring, too.”

She nodded. “It is.”

“Good, then.” He used his free hand to smooth her hair behind her ear. “You may find you enjoy such love talk as well, so voice anything you wish. There is no shame between us, only what gives us both pleasure.”

Only my love for you and my desire to win yours.

She blinked, almost asking him to repeat what she thought he’d just said, but the headiness of his sensual ministrations weighted her tongue.

Her heart pounded slower, harder, with each new caress. Feeling most wanton, she dug her fingers into his hair, wondered how she’d lived so long without such pleasure.

“I am going to rub my face against you now,” he was saying, palming her as he spoke the words. Slow, rough circlings every bit as bliss-spending as the lighter touches. “Just a moment or two to savor your softness, and then we shall move on to more serious pursuits.”

Hollow tension, tight, pulsing, and delicious, coiled low in her belly as he came ever closer until hardly a heartbeat stood between his mouth and her heat. His breath caressed her, warm and soft, the feel of it whispering across her, melting her.

“Your beauty has me on my knees.” He slid his hands along the inside of her thighs. “Seeing you aroused fires my blood.”

Leaning closer, he drew several deep breaths, holding them long

moments before he exhaled, and only after the second or third time, did she realize he was inhaling her.

Drinking her scent.

"I could sate myself on you," he said, nuzzling his cheek, his face, into her, the sheer intimacy of the act loosening the coil of heat spinning inside her. It melted into a slow, trickling warmth, infinitely sweet. "I could spend hours doing this to you, for you."

"Then do," she said, feeling most wicked. *Bold.*

"You are a minx." He slid his lips back and forth across her softness, an earthy growl escaping him. "You would be a worth a king's ransom to many men. Rarely is a woman so lush, hot, and giving."

"I wouldn't know, my lord."

"I do know, and..." He pushed to his feet, discarding the knight's belt slung low around his hips. "I must taste you now," he said. "That, my love, is what I am about to do, flick my tongue over your sweetness."

"Barely there little licks?"

"As you wish." He yanked his tunic over his head, let it drop to the floor. "Would you enjoy that?"

She nodded, watched him tug off his boots, shed his hose and braies, her breath catching at the size of him, his magnificence.

Confident in his nakedness, he planted his hands on his hips and looked down at her, the part of her that burned so hotly.

"Do you know how beautiful you are? Lying there with your knees apart, so very wide apart," he said, his gaze dark. "I could take my ease just by looking my fill on you."

He knelt before her. "I am ravenous for you," he told her, his words making the pulsing between her legs throb even more. "Lie back, sweeting, and let me devour you."

Leaning forward then, he traced the center of her with his tongue, licked her. "Do you like this?"

"Aye..." She twisted, bucking beneath him, her hands clenching.

"Easy, sweet," he soothed her. "Just feel. You will best enjoy this if you remain still and are fully relaxed."

"Can you do that?" he asked from just above her.

She nodded, the tingling pleasure now so intense she could hardly breathe.

Trembling, she did as he bade, lying perfectly still as he lapped at her with slow, wide-tongued strokes. "Do not move," he cautioned her when her hips began rocking in a slow, rhythmic motion. "Simply enjoy."

Pounding need firing his own blood, he drew back to look on her, his gaze drinking in her lush beauty, the sheer bounty and wild

abandon of her.

"You stopped," she objected then, squirming a bit.

"I only paused to admire you," he said, parting her a bit so he had an even better look at the tantalizing heart of her. "And now I shall taste you even more thoroughly."

"Aye, please..." Her thighs tensed then, almost clenching as her hips lifted off the bed.

"Nay, my sweet, no moving...just keep your legs spread wide," he urged, then swept his tongue the length of her.

Once.

"Each time you move, I will stop," he warned, caressing the inside of her thighs, but keeping his fingertips just a breath away from her silken heat. "Can you remain still? If you can, I shall resume. But you must lie perfectly still."

A little cry escaped her and she wound her hands into the bed coverings, her thighs clenching, but still beautifully open, the scent of her arousal, sharp and musky, rising up to intoxicate him.

Savoring it, he inhaled deeply and cupped her, the flat of his palm rubbing slow circles over her.

"You are lovely in your passion. Keep your legs opened for me... as wide as you can. Only so can I pleasure you fully."

And he did.

He opened his mouth over her, wide and hungry, spending bliss with slow, wide-tongued strokes. Again and again, he savored her, wresting every sigh, each sweet tremor from her, hoping to lay bold siege to every barrier she'd raise against him until he won through to her heart.

With all that had, he claimed her, branding her with the desire she craved, until with a great, shuddering cry, she slid into her release, the wonder of it ripping through her.

She went limp, the way to her soul, at last, laid as open to him as her passion.

Or so he hoped.

His own pulse hammering, he stood, relief flooding him that he'd pleased her so. Watching her eddy down from her bliss, hearing her gasping breaths, proved a sweet enough victory to keep his demons silent for a good long while.

But not his heart.

It thumped hard against his ribs, irrevocably lost.

And wanting so much more than soft sighs and passions spent.

Indulging himself in a roguish smile, content with what they'd shared, he looked down at her and savored the depth of his triumph mirrored in her passion-clouded eyes.

Sated eyes.

Never had he seen a woman more beautiful in her release, and never had his own need pounded with such urgency.

"So," he said, trailing his fingers back and forth over her belly. "Are you pleased, my sweet?"

She reached for his hand, laced her fingers with his. "I am well pleased," she said, her voice still thick with her passion, her admission of her pleasure warming his heart.

Her brow knitted. "But you, my lord..."

Marmaduke followed her troubled gaze. Not that he needed to look down to know that his manhood still rode hard against his abdomen.

He drew a long breath. "See you, I have waited many years for such a night as this," he said, catching her hand to his lips for a kiss. "A bit longer will not be my death. It would please me to give you a special gift now, something your sister and her husband sent along for you."

Releasing her hand, he trailed a finger down the side of her face. "Someone left us some hippocras." He indicated a moisture-beaded jug on the nearby table. "Why don't you draw on your robe so you won't chill, and we can enjoy the wine while you admire Linnet's gift."

Turning away, Marmaduke sought the shadow-cast shelter of the little ante-room - but not just to fetch the bejeweled chalices Linnet had sent along as a wedding gift to her sister.

With a weary sigh, he dragged his large, leather satchel beneath the bluish-silver light slanting through the two narrow window slits, then rummaged through the bag until he found the goblets.

But rather than hasten back to his sweet lady wife's side, he stood unmoving in the pale bands of moonlight, and willed his desire to ebb.

Clenching his hands, and excepting Devorgilla, someone he'd never dare offend - he summoned the shriveled faces of every crone he'd happened across on his long journey across Scotland, recalled with a shudder the odious task of securing Dunlaidir's latrine chute, and other unpleasanties, until, at last, the fire left his blood.

When it did, he snatched his cloak off its peg, swirled it over his shoulders, and cursed himself for, once again, bowing to his dark side.

The beast in him he couldn't seem to tame.

Frowning into the shadows, he rained a parade of curses on the foolishness of trusting his skilled hands and practiced lips to bestow marital bliss upon his bride, but being too much of a coward to risk seeing revulsion cloud her eyes in the instant he plunged his need into her.

But, practiced champion that he was, he ran a hand down over his face to smooth the cares from his brow, retrieved the two chalices, then left the ante-room's darkness.

And his own.

Confident he'd challenge his greatest dragon on the morrow...and
be bold enough - next time - to see the battle through to the end.

Chapter 43

S*he'd seen the chalices before.*

Caterine peered at the magnificently jeweled chalice in her hand. The multi-colored gemstones adorning the elaborately worked wine goblet gleamed in the soft light of a hanging cresset lamp.

They winked at her, teasing her with the chalice's familiarity.

She glanced at her husband, but found no answers. He sat in the heavy oaken chair near her bedchamber's hearth, one powerfully muscled leg resting casually over the side of the chair. His fur-lined cloak gaped just enough to reveal a tantalizing glimpse of the hard-muscled planes of his chest and abdomen.

Even more tempting, she could see a titillating hint of his bold masculinity, now fully relaxed and resting against his thigh. Though only partly visible, its length and thickness, even at ease, quickened her blood.

Very aware of the proximity of his maleness, she smoothed her bed-robe, a fine liquid heat winding through her, and tingly hotly across her womanhood.

Again.

And simply from stealing a peek at his dark virility through a shadowed gap in his cloak.

Lifting her gaze at once, her heart near stilled, for his casual expression had fled, and he now watched her with a look of infinite adoration.

A look of love.

Shining, pure, and true.

The same look she'd seen him wear the day she'd imagined him sprawled in Niall's chair so many weeks ago - holding the same jeweled chalice in his hand.

Only that time, she hadn't known who he'd been looking at.

Now she did.

And the meaning of that look sent her heart climbing clear to her throat, set her pulse to racing.

"You are pleased, my lady?" his deep voice flowed around her, tightening his hold on her as soundly as if he'd reached out, grasped

her arms beneath her bed-robe and pulled her into a hard embrace.

"Pleased?" She blinked, her gaze dropping to where a fold of his mantle slipped a bit to reveal even more of his proud manhood. She could now see not only the entirety of his impressive length, but also his sizable ballocks.

Dear heavens.

She resisted the urge to fan herself as languid warmth pooled deep in her most womanly place. "You pleased me well, my lord, as I thought you-"

"Are you distracted, fair one?" He smiled, then held up Linnet's gift, toasting her – just as he'd done the day she'd imagined him in Niall's solar. "I meant are you pleased with the goblets?" he supplied, his smoldering gaze assuring her he knew full well *he'd* pleased her.

"Linnet has a complete set waiting for you at Balkenzie," he added, his words dousing the sensual heat curling in her belly. His firm conviction that she, too, would soon be at Balkenzie, pinched her heart.

She didn't want to go to Balkenzie - nor did she want to lose her champion.

Or the fragile stirrings of her convictions: that she'd finally discovered not just desire, but love, too.

Pulling her bed-robe more securely about her shoulders, she raised the finely wrought chalice to her lips and took a sip of hippocras.

A sip of determination.

Steely determination.

So bolstered, she moved closer to his chair, and rested a hand on his broad shoulder. Its muscled strength, his warmth, reached her even through the thickness of his cloak. "I would rather Linnet and her husband visit us here," she said, forcing a light tone. "They can bring the other goblets with them."

"Your sister will not be venturing anywhere for some while," he said, his words carefully measured, his demeanor guarded enough to make her forget her own cares.

She looked sharply at him. "Is she ill?"

Marmaduke hesitated, weighing the concern on his wife's face against the depth of his honor, the value of a promise given.

If Catherine knew her sister would soon birth her first child, she'd be certain to accompany him to Balkenzie, even if she planned to stay only long enough to see the child born. And once he had her at Balkenzie, he knew he could persuade her to stay.

But he wanted her by his side because she *wanted* to be there.

Because she loved him.

"Linnet is well," he said at last, giving her the most neutral gaze he could muster, and silently praying he spoke the truth. "Eilean Creag is

a large and busy holding, her duties as laird's wife do not allow her to travel far."

Not a lie, but not the entire truth.

And half-truth or nay, enough to make his wife press her sweet lips into a firm line.

To his amazement, she set down the jeweled chalice and, with the artfulness of a well-skilled lady-of-pleasure, leaned against the table's edge in such a way that the front edges of her robe parted to display the lush, top swells of her breasts.

Their crests remained hidden, but what he saw was enough to heat his blood and shoot jolts of fiery desire straight into his loins.

"And when will you retrieve those other chalices, my lord?" she asked, her voice soft, the slight catch revealing she knew exactly what she was about, knew the sight of even just the top rounds of her breasts, would stir him anew.

She meant to use her charms to keep him from leaving.

Marmaduke drew a deep breath, and willed the pull at his loins to recede. "I shall not be retrieving them," he said, forcing himself to keep his gaze above her shoulders. "In a few days, after Sir Hugh has been dealt with, my men and I – and you – shall depart for Kintail. The goblets will await us, and remain, at Balkenzie."

"I see." With one smooth movement, she unfastened her bed-robe's clasp and let the voluminous cloak billow to the floor. She bent to snatch it off the rushes, purposely choosing an angle that would give him the most stirring view as she did so.

"I shall retire now, my lord. I would welcome your embrace, if you choose to join me."

Nay, my lady, you shall join me - at Balkenzie, Marmaduke's heart amended.

His arousal had other ideas and roared at him to follow her, but before he could push to his feet, a small, cold nose bumped against his shin.

As if unsure of his welcome, Leo pushed up on his back legs and pawed Marmaduke's knee, the accompanying little-dog-whimper assuring Marmaduke's attention.

And the instant he gave it, the wee creature dropped back down on his rump, turned pleading brown eyes on him, and began to shiver.

A ploy if Marmaduke ever saw one.

Still...

Winter was on the doorstep.

And so he cast a wistful glance toward the great four-poster across the room. His lady had pulled the bed curtains and the saints knew what sultry pleasures awaited him behind their drawn folds.

But another whimper reached his ears just then and this one

sounded decidedly pitiful.

Heaving a sigh of defeat, Marmaduke pinched the bridge of his nose, and sent up a silent prayer that is he and his lady were ever blessed with a son, the lad would be spared his father's soft heart.

Then, his decision made, or, better said, made for him, he leaned down and scooped the furry little bugger onto his lap.

All pretense of his oh-woe-is-me act vanishing from his dark, round eyes, Leo promptly nosed aside the edge of Marmaduke's cloak and swiftly disappeared beneath its warm folds.

The little dog settled himself without a single glance or grunt of gratitude. And, soft-hearted fool that he was, Marmaduke settled back for a long night, too.

And consigned himself to kneading the wee beastie's still-shivering shoulders rather than plying the bounty of his lady wife's irrefutable charms.

Charms he meant to claim in full very soon.

Her charms and her heart.

For now, he rested his head against the chairback, and listened to her tossing and turning behind the bed curtains. All the night through, the rustlings and her frustrated sighs continued. They hung sweet in the air, fair music to his ears.

Burgeoning hope to a heart besieged.

For even one as blighted as he recognized what lurked behind her inability to sleep.

A pleased smile curving his lips, he stared into the darkness, for the hearth fire had all but burned out, and the torches had long since flickered their last.

Slipping a hand inside his cloak, he rubbed gently behind Leo's floppy ears and savored each and every soft swishing noise to slip past the bed curtains, relished each breathy little burst of impatience to escape her sleep-deprived lips.

Utterly feminine sounds, pointed and recognizable, their meaning well-known to any man capable of satisfying a woman.

Even more so to a man accustomed to winning a lady's heart.

His own heart quickening in response, he pulled his cloak closer about his little friend and leaned back in the chair to await the coming dawn.

And revel in the knowledge that Catherine wanted more than just his prowess - she wanted his love.

And perhaps, if he was very, very lucky, she'd want it enough to give him her own as well.

She already has, my dear heart, the keening wind whispered somewhere out across the night-blackened waters.

She already has.

Chapter 44

Asennight later, in the small hours of a silent, moonless night, Sir Marmaduke, James, Black Dugie, and a few carefully selected garrison men reined up on a low, tree-dotted knoll at the head of a shallow glen. Cloaks as black as the cold heavens hid the gleam of their armor as they stared across the winter-brown gorse and heather to where Kinraven's towers rose dark against the night sky.

Faint light shone in but a few of the stronghold's narrow slit windows and the blustery wind carried only deep quiet and the gentle lapping of water on the nearby lochshore.

One of the garrison men edged his horse forward. "Should we launch a sham attack on one of the towers before we move in?" he asked, his low-spoken words overloud in the stillness.

Marmaduke shook his head. "If my men scale those walls as swiftly as they've climbed others, and those with them spread enough tinder in the right places, Kinraven will be a blackened waste by first light whether we draw our swords or leave them sheathed."

He glanced round at the others. "Nay, we have no need of such a ruse. Dark of night, surprise, and our own good sword arms will suffice."

Murmurs of agreement rose from the gathered men.

"James." Marmaduke turned to the younger man. "You have the best vision. Can you tell if our men have breached the parapets?"

James narrowed his eyes to stare toward the distant keep. "The ladders are in place and the two men I can see are nearing the topmost rungs."

"Any sentries?" A Keith man-at-arms wanted to know.

James shook his head just as one of the garrison men emerged from the thicket. The man kneed his horse closer. "All is in readiness," he said, shoving back his mailed coif.

"Our men are in place," he added, drawing up before Marmaduke. "Every last twig of dried gorse and broom we've collected over the last days has been put about. We even plundered the stables of straw."

"The horses?" Marmaduke asked.

"Scattered, but safe," the rider told him. "We can retrieve 'em easy

enough when we're done here."

"Good, so." Satisfied, Marmaduke looked toward Kinraven, could just make out the stream of men moving up the rope scaling ladders. They appeared to be slipping easily over the castle walls. He turned back to the man-at-arms. "Those entering the keep have enough tinder to set the inside ablaze?"

The other nodded. "We pulled the thatch from a few outbuildings."

"What of our cattle?" James snapped his gaze from the stronghold. "Are they out of harm's way?"

"Herdsmen are gathering them now," the man-at-arms answered, rubbing his spume-flecked horse behind the ears. "They'll have them past the loch-head and on the way back to Dunlaidir before the first flames-"

"By God, they've started!" Black Dugie thrust out an arm, pointing to where flames, orange and bright, leapt high into the inky darkness. Already, pluming clouds of smoke rose above Kinraven's walls.

The wind carried the noise of distant shouting, shrill cries and curses, and an eerie reddish glow began spreading across the night sky. The stronghold and its surrounds, no longer dark and sleeping, erupted in hellish chaos.

Wheeling his horse around, Marmaduke raised his mailed arm. "Come, men, it is time to show yon blackguards the road to England," he called out. "God's mercy on those who choose not to take it."

Then, digging gold spurs into his horse's flanks, he sent the beast plunging down the scrub-covered slope, the others spurring after him. Together, they thundered toward the flaming pyre that had once been Kinraven Castle.



WITHIN THE SHELTERING walls of Dunlaidir Castle, in a tower chamber high above the tossing sea, Catherine passed the night pacing the magnificent arch-topped windows curving the length of her stepson's lairdly quarters, chased there by the emptiness of her own bedchamber.

A void she'd hoped to fill with Rhona's chatty presence. But this night even Rhona was subdued. She reclined on James' bed, comforting herself by petting Leo.

Restless, she continued to prowl the windows, her gaze on the cliff road. She tried willing her husband and the others to appear, but the mainland cliff-head, stretching as far into the darkness as the curving bank of windows allowed her to see, remained deserted.

She glanced at Rhona. "Shouldn't they have returned by now?"

"Nae, my lady. I doubt we'll see them before cockcrow. Perhaps

not until gloaming.”

“So long?” Catherine’s heart dipped. “Surely not.”

Rhona looked at her. “Think you it will be easy to turn a holding the size of Kinraven into soot and ash?”

“Of course, not,” Catherine said, staring out at the night-darkened sea as she paced past the bank of windows. “If I did, I’d be asleep in my bed.”

“You are wearing a track in the floor rushes,” Rhona said, and Catherine glanced at her.

“So?”

“You’re unsettled.”

Catherine tried to see some hint of distress behind her friend’s dark eyes. “Are you not concerned for them?”

She had to be, for the depth of Rhona’s feelings for James permeated the chamber. It was there in the array of her trinkets scattered about, and through the number of her clothes hanging on the wall pegs.

“Have you so little faith?” Rhona stroked Leo’s back. “Your champion swings a mighty sword,” she said. “If I do not doubt my love’s safe return, then surely you should have no concerns for yours.”

“He is not my love.” Catherine stepped closer to the nearest window and rested her forehead against the cold, grainy stone of the elaborately carved tracery.

She welcomed its cooling relief.

“I enjoy his attentions,” she admitted. “He is well-skilled.”

“Truth tell?”

“So I said.” Catherine trailed her fingers along the window’s edge, watched the thin white mist curling above the waves.

“I am not surprised,” Rhona rattled on. “He is a fine, braw man. A gallant knight, a champion. How could he not steal your heart?”

“Have done.” Catherine straightened, but kept her gaze on the sea. “You are not going to squeeze a confession of love out of me. The only thing he has stolen from me is my aversion to his English blood and my desire to live an abstemious life.”

“So you enjoy lying with him.”

“I do.” Catherine owned, feeling her friend’s I-told-you-so smile clear across the room. “That does not mean he has stolen my heart. One pleasure can be savored without the other, as you of all souls should know.”

Guilt pierced her on the words, and she whirled around. “I am sorry, I did not mean-” she broke off because Rhona looked anything but hurt.

Far from it, she wore a knowing smile.

More telling, she was tapping her chin. A sign that whatever she

was about to say, had to do with Sir Marmaduke. And so far, all her pronouncements and predictions had come true.

"I have it!" Rhona cried then, her smile widening. "You are right. He has not stolen your heart. You've given it to him."

Caterine drew a strangled breath – of cold, briny air and denial. "You are mad."

Rhona laughed. "Perhaps, but in the best of ways."

"You are a long-nosed, meddling-"

"I am the friend who loves you, and you are in love with your champion," Rhona declared, and Caterine's heart agreed.

"Nae, I am not," *she* returned.

Rhona laughed again.

And Caterine wondered.

But before she could look too deeply into places she might not want to go, she swung back to the windows. Far out to sea, billowing white fog blotted the horizon, smudging it from view much as her champion's smooth gallantry and carnal prowess had blurred and knocked down every barrier she'd thought to raise against him.

Until not a one remained.

Leastways, none save her determination not to let him go.

A tiny smile curved her lips.

She possessed one remaining *allure* he hadn't yet sampled, and she knew instinctively that once he had, he'd never leave her side.

Men fought wars over suchlike, and even she was woman enough to know it.

Her smile deepened, her hope restored.

Upon his return, as soon as he'd refreshed himself and bathed, she would love him.

Fully.

Chaos and confusion greeted Sir Marmaduke and those with him as they thundered up to Kinraven's burning gatehouse. Sleep-dazed men, most half-clothed, some naked, poured from its ruined, smoking entrance to scatter in the turmoil of the red-glowing night.

A brave few souls clashed furious swords with Marmaduke's Highlanders, and the clanging ring of steel on steel made a hellish echo against the pandemonium of running, shouting men and the neighing of wild-eyed, prancing horses.

Other Keith guardsmen rounded up the English soldiers seeking to flee, while those already subdued, stood under guard in a tight cluster, stamping their feet against the cold, their faces grim.

Pressing into the middle of the fray, Marmaduke pushed up in his stirrups, his sword raised high. "Cease!" His deep voice rang out above the din. "Hear you, my own good men and the rest of you. This is between de la Hogue and myself. All others, sheathe your steel."

"A pig's arse, I will!" someone called back.

Sir Gowan.

The rest of his men obeyed at once, expectant, knowing grins spreading across their faces. Others followed suit more slowly, until gradually, the worst of the tumult died down. The Keith men exchanged glances, but kept their blades lowered, so long as their opponents did as well.

The remainder of the shirt-clad English garrison, now stripped of all weapons and circled by hard-faced Keith guardsmen, looked on with a mixture of wariness and grudging respect.

Considering them, Marmaduke drew a long breath of the biting, acrid air. Without the resplendent trappings of their knightly station, wild-haired and half-clothed as they stood shivering before the burning gatehouse, they made a pitiful sight.

With their bared limbs and torn nightshirts streaked with soot, some with blood, they appeared more frightful than his men at their worst.

They also looked young.

Too young to die for an ill-chased cause.

Too English to deserve the leniency Marmaduke meant to spend them.

Swallowing the curse rising in his throat, he swung down from his saddle and tossed his reins to James. "Men of de la Hogue," he addressed them, raising his voice above the roar of the flames, "I, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow of Balkenzie, greet you."

Tight-lipped silence answered him.

Unfazed, he swept them with a measuring stare. "Where is your lord? I would challenge him to single combat - if he is man enough to accept."

"I am man enough, Strongbow, but I see you are somewhat lacking since last we met."

The voice came from behind him and Marmaduke turned to see Hugh de la Hogue step from the billowing cloud of smoke pouring from the gatehouse's arched entrance. Ruddy-faced and fully-armed, he strode forward, a handful of bedraggled, choking men stumbling out behind him.

"I'd heard the rumors, but now I see your renowned handsomeness is indeed but a memory," he taunted, his voice amazingly unaffected by the shroud of thick smoke he'd just pressed through. "I scarce recognize you."

"You, son of a sow." Sir Gowan rushed him, his great Highland sword raised for a smiting blow.

Sir Hugh sidestepped the vicious downswing with surprising agility. He blocked Gowan's second slashing arc with equal skill, their blades meeting with an ear-splitting *clank*.

"Enough, MacKenzie!" Marmaduke stayed his friend, even as Sir Ross and Sir Alec pushed forward to strong-arm him back into the growing circle of onlookers.

"You've taken up with a wild pack, Strongbow," de la Hogue sought to provoke him. "A heathenish lot."

Ignoring the slur, Marmaduke raked the other's steel-girt form with disdain. "Heathen?" He lifted a brow. "And what do you call a man who, under siege, dallies behind to array himself in metal while leaving his men to face their challengers in naught but naked skin?"

Grumbles came from the ranks of Sir Hugh's soot-blackened men, some underscoring their agreement with nods and accusatory glares aimed not at Marmaduke, but at their red-faced liege.

"Do not heed him," Sir Hugh spluttered, his heavily beringed fingers clenching and unclenching on the hilt of his sword. "The fool was ever blessed with a silver tongue and high looks."

Raising his blade, he pointed its tip at Marmaduke. "A pity you've lost the latter," he drawled. "Keep harassing me and you'll lose your life as well."

The Highlanders snorted at that and, at the sounds, Sir Hugh's face purpled.

He waved his sword at the teeth-chattering group of bare-bottomed men huddled some distance away. "Think you they are my only guards?" he cried. "Sniveling women! They ran at the first sign of trouble. But I have other men, better-skilled ones."

He threw a quick but significant glance at the smoke-clogged gatehouse. "They are yet inside, arming themselves as we speak. You are out-manned in more ways than one, Strongbow."

"Think you?" Before the words were fully past his lips, Marmaduke arched his steel in a flashing, sideways sweep that knocked the earl's blade from his hand.

The sword hit the cobbles with a loud clatter even as Marmaduke pressed the tip of his own into de la Hogue's mail-covered paunch. "You, sir, could not out-man a lowly earthworm," he said, jerking his head toward the Highlanders and Keith men-at-arms who'd been inside the keep. "Show him your steel, men."

And they did.

Not a blade was raised that didn't gleam red, and not from the licking flames raging all around them.

Marmaduke waited for comprehension to dawn on de la Hogue's face before he continued. "Any men not yet amongst us perished in the fire, or forfeited their life for a mistaken cause when they rose against yon men as they poured over the castle walls."

Sir Hugh wet his lips. "There are more..." He cast a nervous glance toward the cold, windy dark of the nearby lochshore. "Men on patrol. They will-"

"James," Marmaduke called over his shoulder, "do you see any of de la Hogue's guard moving about?"

"Nae," James returned. "I see naught but the starry night and the flames of hell waiting for the craven."

"We came across a patrol," Ross' deep voice came from the sidelines. "Those men are no more," the Highlander finished, his words earning chortles of a dark sort from Marmaduke's other men.

"Aye," Alec spoke up, agreeing. "Those sorry souls met their end when they tried to keep us from taking a bit of thatch off the outbuildings."

"All dead?" Marmaduke kept his gaze on Sir Hugh.

"Every last one." That from young Sir Lachlan.

"Lies!" de la Hogue denied, hostility flashing across his face. "They were too many to be felled by a handful."

Marmaduke only arched a brow. "That would depend on the handful, I'd say. It would seem, good sir, that you are out-manned and in more ways than the obvious."

Withdrawing his sword-point from the earl's belly, he used it to gesture to the other's fallen blade. "You'd be wise to commend yourself to God's care, for very shortly you shall face Him," he advised. "Now retrieve your sword and fight nobly so you may leave this world with more honor than you peopled it."

Sir Hugh slid an uneasy glance at the cluster of pathetic, freezing souls who'd made up his guard. It's begun to snow, and their bared heads were dusted with white, making them appear more like a band of dottering graybeards than an assembly of England's best."

His jaw working in anger, Sir Hugh snatched up his sword and tossed one, last desperate look at his men. "Think you they will stand by and-"

"They will do what is wise and return to their homes," Marmaduke finished for him, his tone deceptively mild. "They'd no doubt fetch a fine ransom, but I believe this land is better served if they take themselves from it this very hour, on their knightly honor never to return."

"Have a care," de la Hogue sneered, lifting his blade. "Each time you've harped on honor in the past, you've paid a high price."

"So I have," Marmaduke returned, controlling his anger as expertly as he wielded steel. "Yet I shall greet the morrow's dawn, a pleasure you shall not enjoy."

The observation made, Marmaduke advanced on the earl. He circled him with measured steps, as aware of the snow-and-soot-slicked cobbles beneath his feet as he was of de la Hogue's every move.

"Fiend!" Sir Hugh yelled, then lunged and stabbed, swinging furiously, his every hacking thrust falling short or blocked until he began shouting more slurs with each clumsy, slashing swipe.

An eerie silence fell over the watching throng, the baited hush emphasizing the roaring crackle of burning timber.

And always, Marmaduke advanced, pushing his foe ever farther toward the burning gatehouse.

"Aggggh!" Sir Hugh shrieked when a shower of sparks and falling, burning debris rained down on him. Cursing, he dragged his free arm over his eyes and raised his sword for a wild, downward slash.

A blind strike, the fury of which would've lopped off the arm of a less-skilled swordsman, but Marmaduke avoided the blow with ease and dealt one of his own.

A broad sideways swipe, lightning quick, and slicing across the exposed area beneath Sir Hugh's arm, the earl's shrill cry and the shooting spray of bright red blood giving unmistakable voice to the depth of the cut.

"You bastard!" he screeched, grabbing beneath his arm, his sword

clattering to the cobbles. His face purple with rage, he flung himself at Marmaduke, his feet slipping on the slick cobbles.

Arms wheeling, he almost righted himself just as a large section of the gatehouse door behind them burst into an inferno of leaping flames, then crashed down in a great plume of sparks, directly on top of him.

"Fore God!" One of Marmaduke's men cried, running toward him, the others quick on his heels.

The earl's death screams ringing in the air, Marmaduke stood frozen as his men beat their hands on his head and shoulders, knocking off the burning bits of wood and sparks before they could catch flame.

"Saints a-mercy!" James dashed sparks from Marmaduke's eyebrows with the pads of his thumbs.

And when at last they all stepped back from him, he did thank the saints.

Once more they'd stood by him.

As did a small, black-garbed woman he'd glimpsed fleetingly when fighting with the earl. She'd stood in shadow, near the blackened shell of a byre. He'd only caught a glimpse of her, the bright sparks flying off her red plaid shoelaces, and her nod, letting him know he'd ride away unscathed.

At least, that's how he'd interpreted old Dev's appearance.

If indeed, he'd seen her.

Men see much in the heat of battle, so he supposed he'd never know for sure.

He did roll his shoulders, knew he'd be forever grateful.

"It's over," he said to his men.

"The gods were with us." Gowan, the most old-ways-following of the Highlanders reached to pluck a charred bit of wood from Marmaduke's hair. "Thanks be."

"Every one of them, aye," Marmaduke agreed, his gaze flicking to the now-deserted byre ruin. "The good saints above, and others."

"Aye, we're done here," Sir Alec strode up to them, thrust his bloodied sword into the ash-and-soot-grimed ground. "The vermin are gone."

"True enough." His breath still burning his lungs, Marmaduke looked to where de la Hogue lay buried beneath the burning rubble. Only his feet could be seen. Already smoking, they poked out from a mound of splintered and smoldering wood.

"A fitting end for the dastard." Gowan scratched his bearded chin. "A foretaste of where he's at now."

"And the others?" One of the Keith garrison men nodded to de la Hogue's men, still huddled in a tight knot some distance away. "What

do we do with them?"

Marmaduke followed the man's gaze, then heaved a great sigh. Glancing heavenward, he remembered his own zeal and pride when he, too, at their young age had made the mistake of following the wrong man.

And so...

After a long moment, he ran a hand through his singed hair and sighed again. "See them home, my friend, see them home," he said, once more, as so often in his life, following his heart rather than prudence.

"Gather what raiments the lot of you can spare them, then escort them to the border," he added, capping his own men's welling disapproval with a stern, warning glance.

Then, before prudence could seize him after all, he gave the guardsman a light shove toward the waiting captives. "Go now," he said. "Off with you, off with them."

"And I say, off with us!" Sir Alec declared as he vaulted into his saddle.

The other Highlanders chorused hearty agreement. As one, they mounted their steeds and reined round, putting the burning pyre of Kinraven swiftly behind them.

Only Marmaduke hesitated.

With a heavy heart and a disturbing tightness in his throat, he watched the young English knights swallow their pride and don whatever bits of clothing the Keith men tossed to them.

Then, before the Keith guardsmen could begin herding them south, Marmaduke turned his back on the ragtag group, on his own long-ago past, and swung up onto his saddle.

"Aye, Alec," he agreed, the moment he caught up with the Highlanders. "It is time to go home."

And not a man who heard him had to guess which home he meant.



CATERINE CAME AWAKE the instant Leo hopped from her lap and streaked to the door. His mistress forgotten, he plopped onto his rump, his golden-brown head cocked to the side, his floppy ears lifted in rapt attention.

Even from behind, from the cushioned confines of the window embrasure where she sat, Catherine knew his round eyes stared unblinking at the door's heavy oaken panels.

Knew they brimmed with adoration.

Expectancy.

As did hers, no doubt, for Leo's behavior could only indicate one

thing: Marmaduke had returned at last and would soon stride through her door.

Blinking the gritty weariness from her own eyes, she strained her ears but heard only the deafening crush of silence. Even the endless pounding of the sea against the rocks below seemed hushed.

Her heart hammering nonetheless, she pushed to her feet and scanned the dimly lit bedchamber. Blue-violet shadows stretched across the rushes, darkening the corners and proving she'd slept long and deep.

Even the wall torches and hanging cresset lamp had extinguished themselves, leaving only the orange-glowing hearth embers to illuminate the silent chamber.

The interminable night and the endless hours of the day had slipped behind her. Vanishing without her notice, whisked away as if by some enchantment during her exhausted slumber.

And somehow, some great and mysterious secret that had hovered so near as she'd dozed, escaped her as well. A slight frown knitted her brow as she grasped for whatever it was, and failed.

Conceding defeat, she pressed her hands to the small of her back and stretched. Sleeping in the relatively small area of the narrow window seat, had taken its toll.

Just as the quiet unraveled her calm.

Tilting her head to the side, she listened hard, but again, heard only silence. No familiar footfalls, confident and proud, approached her door. No muffled stirrings sounded from the great hall below.

A glance at the unshuttered windows as well as the bite of the icy air pouring through them, revealed the reason for the eerie stillness. Sometime during the night, it'd begun to snow.

Whirling curtains of fast-falling snow slanted past the arch-topped windows, and a fair dusting already mounded along the window's outer ledge.

Then a noise did intrude on the silence.

Just the creak of a floorboard, and a distant one from the sound of it, but loud enough to set her pulse racing and persuade Leo to give up his patient vigil.

With a shrill yap of joy, he launched himself at the closed door, his tail wagging, his button nose sniffing at its seam – leastways, as high as the limitations of his size allowed.

Trembling, her fingers shaking nearly as furiously as Leo's wagging tail, she looked about for something to do. Anything to occupy herself so, if the approaching footsteps were his, he wouldn't immediately see she'd fretted through every moment of his absence.

How fervently she'd prayed for his safe return, dreamed of him as she'd dozed.

Vivid dreams of passion and love.

Love?

At once, she remembered. Everything. And with the realization, she almost burned her fingers on the candle flame she'd been holding to the wicks of the extinguished cresset lamp.

"Ouch!" She set down the offending candlestick and thrust the tip of her smarting finger into her mouth just as the door swung wide.

"Ouch?" Her champion stepped inside with his usual lordly grace, pausing only to drop the drawbar in place before bending down to scoop Leo into his arms.

Leo wriggled with glee, squirming wildly as he welcomed Sir Marmaduke with enthusiastic little dog kisses. And all the while her champion regarded her with a look that could only be called smoldering.

Smoldering in a sensual and practical sense, for patches of his hair appeared singed, as did one eyebrow. Setting Leo on the floor, he crossed the room with great strides, the little dog running circles around him.

"You are burned," she cried, her eyes widening.

"My lady, it is nothing. Truly..." He gathered her in his arms, crushing her to him. "It is over," he murmured against her hair, his voice tired but thick with some emotion she hadn't heard before. "Kinraven is no more and Sir Hugh has breathed his last."

Caterine pulled back to look at him, an odd mixture of relief and dread coursing through her. Relief that he'd returned, dread at knowing he'd now see his purpose here fulfilled.

"I thank you," she managed, her gratitude sincere even if the words sounded hollow.

He shook his head. "Nay, my lady. It is your companion and your sister we must thank," he said, clearly meaning something entirely different from Sir Hugh's demise.

"Those fair ladies and perhaps one handsome devil of a Highland laird," he added, his good eye crinkling in amusement.

Caterine's gaze flickered again to his singed hair. "You are not injured elsewhere?" she asked, skimming her fingers across his right eyebrow.

"Nay." He gave her a lopsided smile. "The saints only protect me from sword cuts. Swords and other sundry arms of evil." The mirth in his voice assured her he bore no more serious hurt than patches of frizzled hair. "They never promised to keep me safe from flying embers and sparks."

He quirked a blackened brow at her. "I'd hoped if I bathed and washed before I came abovestairs, you'd not notice."

Marmaduke cringed inwardly at the grave understatement.

He'd taken greatest pains to comb his unmarred hair over the singed patches, had even rubbed some of Linnet's *beauty treatment* on the crinkled spots, all in the hope of disguising the damage.

Apparently in vain.

But to his vast relief, a tiny smile curved his lady's lips and she pushed up on her toes to brush a kiss against his ruined eyebrow. "It doesn't matter, my lord," she said, reaching for his hand.

"Come, and let me give you a proper welcome home," she added, leading him to the bed.

And Marmaduke gladly followed.

The morrow would be time enough to tell her it was indeed time to go home.

Home to Balkenzie.

A good while later, as the dark night wrapped itself around Dunlaidir and the rest of the world slept, Sir Marmaduke tossed in a tangled whirl of satiny bedcoverings and his lady's silken thighs, and dreamed.

Of dark, smoldering passion and throaty, sated sighs.

Of sensual ecstasy, tight and winding, the shattering glory of his lady's release.

The thundering spill of his own.

The lingering bliss of her so sweet upon his lips. Her earthy sensuality, so warm and roused, fanning the flames inside him, flooding his senses with each drawn breath.

He came awake at once - and found his lady wife snuggled close beside him, her head resting on his shoulder. Feeling blessed more than any man living, he smoothed his hands over the satiny warmth of her back, soothing her, loving her.

"I didn't think you'd ever waken," she said, and slid a hand along his muscled shoulder, down his hard-slabbed chest. "I've been touching you for hours."

"Oh?"

"Aye, the longest time," she purred, her fingers teasing chest hair.

"I am glad." He swallowed, grateful he'd awakened, and that her touch, the *love* brimming in her passion-glazed eyes hadn't been a dream.

Need consuming him, he pushed up on his elbows and watched her hand drift lower to tease across his abdomen. His entire body tightened when she extended her explorations, her fingers brushing lightly against his arousal.

He released a ragged breath. "Would you see me run mad?"

"I would pleasure you." She looked at him, melting his heart.

"You pleasure my every waking hour," he vowed. "Watching you breathe pleasures me."

He caught her to him, kissing her deeply, but she pulled away, straightening her back so the full thrust of her breasts pushed through her streaming, unbound hair.

“You have not yet taken full ease with me,” she said, lowering her hand to caress him. “You are my husband and champion and have waited long. I would give you that release now.”

And she almost did.

Simply by stating her intent.

His passion rising, he looked at her, studied her face for any sign of wariness or hesitation.

He saw none.

Nothing marked her save her beauty and willingness.

Her acceptance and desire to please him.

That wonder swirled around him, stroking his soul. Embracing him as surely as her caressing hands drove him toward the release of all the hunger and need pounding through him.

“I shall never let you go,” he vowed, the shackles of his doubt falling away, spinning into the shadows.

One by one, they dissolved as if they’d never been.

And I shall not let you go, he thought he heard her say, though, in truth, she’d only sighed.

I want you to stay.

That, he heard...with his heart.

Truly spoken or nay, the words hovered between them, a challenge tossed, but not accepted. And not menacing enough to dim the blazing need raging inside him.

Her golden hair spilling around her in wild abandon, she held his gaze and parted her streaming tresses to reveal her breasts. “I know you enjoy looking at them,” she said, smiling at him. “I want this night filled with everything that brings you pleasure.”

“Lady, you did that the day you were born,” he said, his heart splitting wide.

She cared for him, he suspected. Leastways, she was coming to do so.

And she wanted him.

Her eyes, her questing hands, her soft, little sighs, everything about her this night, said she desired him as fully as he ached for her.

And this time, he would tend that yearning.

“You are beautiful, Catherine,” he said, lowering his head to nuzzle the smooth, full rounds of her breasts. “Aye, a woman made to be savored and cherished.”

“I am a woman blessed,” she returned, meeting his gaze, the look in her eyes letting him know she meant him. “I am your bride. Now make me wholly yours. I am ready.”

Not wanting to rush her, Marmaduke slipped a hand between her legs, stroking her, testing her readiness. “Shall I kiss you first?” He gave her the choice, aware of the pleasure she took in his intimate

kisses, intoxicated, as well, by his own need to taste her.

“Or shall I caress you a bit more?” he suggested, letting his fingers work their magic.

Unable *not* to.

Sensual need ripping through him, he explored and savored her. Again and again, he trailed his fingers up and down her softness, treating her to luxuriously slow strokes, a languid gliding along her most tender flesh.

A worshipping of the silken heat he found there.

“If you wish me to kiss you, then settle back so I can savor you soundly,” he offered, one finger circling, addressing her most sensitive spot.

Something – passion? – darkened her eyes and she slipped away from him to stretch back against the pillows. “Did you mishear me, my lord?” she asked, parting her thighs. “I *am* ready. I want you to take me. Fully, and with all of you.”

“You are certain?” he had to ask, his doubts and demons not quite ready to clear the field, their insistent voices warning that revulsion would flash across her face the instant he mounted her.

But the desire in her eyes, the rocking of her hips, and her opened arms called louder.

And he capitulated.

“I love you, Catherine,” he said, at last moving over her.

“Then have me,” she returned, reaching for him again.

Not the answer he’d hoped for, but her touch, her fingers moving ever so sweetly on his straining need, blinded him to all else.

Wholly besieged, he positioned himself, taking his weight on his arms and letting her guide him to her sweetness.

Touching him to her silken heat, she cupped his cheek with her free hand, traced his scar. “You are a true champion,” she said, “and I care deeply for you.”

Care deeply?

Alarm bells clanged in his ears, and a bone-chilling cold iced his heart in the very moment he entered her.

And then he was lost.

Too consumed by her velvety tightness, he paused, holding himself above her with just a bit of him inside her...waiting only long enough to slide his hand between them to caress her, and so ease his taking of her.

Verging dangerously on the edge of his own release, he plied her with slow, circling strokes, and then he began inching ever deeper into her molten sleekness.

Only when her breathing became shallow, little gasps and the rocking of her hips grew frantic, did he draw back and plunge fully

inside her, making her his with one smooth, claiming stroke.

The sheer pleasure of possessing her near ended him at first glide. She arched her hips, pressing against him, and he lowered his head to draw the crest of one breast into his mouth. He swirled his tongue round and round as he glided in and out of her with long, smooth strokes. And all the while he kept his hand wedged between them, and rubbed her.

No...please...

Marmaduke stilled at once, cold dread thrusting icy talons deep into his pride, but then she gave a sweet little cry, a sigh of bliss, and his doubts withdrew.

Then, with another, deeper cry – a throaty, full-passioned one – she dug her fingers into his shoulders, clinging to him, her body trembling and tensing beneath him, her wild abandon assuring him as nothing else could, that he'd imagined the barely audible protest.

One last taunt thrown at him by his devils.

Ignoring them, he lifted his head to capture her mouth, catching her cries and giving her his, their breath melding as he claimed her lips in a deep, slaking kiss, and made her his with his lips and his passion.

Her thighs clenching around him, she drew him closer, the tremors of her release trembling through her in splendid rhythm with the thunderous pull of his own.

And then a brilliant whiteness seized him, a spinning whirlwind of sensual ecstasy so powerful, so intense, he could scarce breathe.

He almost roared with the glory of it and even thought he heard her cry his name, but his blood pounded so fiercely in his ears, he couldn't be sure.

So he simply held her, and hoped she'd called out to him.

He knew she'd found her ease.

And he'd found the veriest of heavens.



Hold her legs wide.

Whore.

The words...the taunts and jeers...began even before her champion slipped back into the deep sleep she'd pulled him from. They came at her from the shadows, long-suppressed images crashing onto the wildest shores of her memory, haunting her even as triumph of their splendid passion still washed over her.

Ghosts of the past, returning to damn her.

And steal the freedom she thought she'd seized at last.

Lying perfectly still, she tried to close her ears to the long-faded

slurs, the brutal visitations of pain best forgotten. She shut her eyes, hoping to cling to the bliss of being wrapped so protectively, so lovingly, in her champion's arms, but the images followed her.

Cold and relentless, inescapable as the incoming tide, her darkest hour rose to claim her, sneaking into her bedchamber, stealing round her curtained bed, and even pulling back the bed hangings to leer at her.

An assemblage of jeering apparitions gathered in the predawn gloom to gleefully declare their hold on her. To superimpose their cruel, lust-crazed faces over her husband's beloved one, and remind her that the arms now holding her, were *English* arms.

Would always remind her of *their* English arms.

And to assure her they would never leave her. Never allow her to fully love him. Not as he deserved to be loved.

Sir Marmaduke Strongbow should be loved with a full and glad heart. Not one he'd have to share with the shadows of a past she couldn't flee.

And so, as carefully as she could, she pushed up on her elbow to peer down at him, determined to see only *his* face and, blessedly, she did.

His face was relaxed and beautiful in sleep, his scar not marring, but highlighting his handsomeness – the shining glory of a truly noble heart.

A champion's heart.

She smoothed her fingers over his hair, her heart welling as her fingertips skimmed over the singed parts...another badge of honor, another reason he needed a woman who could love him fully, with all her heart and not just her passion.

Her own heart wrenching, she slipped from the bed. Deep in an exhausted sleep, he didn't even notice her leave. Or perhaps he did, for he rolled onto his side and thrust out an arm, moving his hand over the bed sheets as if he sought her warmth.

And have you decided, my lady?

She started, hearing the words as surely as if he stood before her, hands on her shoulders and looking down at her with his special smile.

The rare one that brought out his dimples.

"Have I decided what, my lord?" she spoke into the quiet, her voice soft and tremulous, so tight was the burning constriction in her throat.

"Have I decided what?" she asked again, reaching for him, almost touching her hand to his pitifully singed hair.

If I am a charmer of women?

A spell-caster?

Her heart heard his query...and answered him as well.

Aye, you are, my dearest.

He was, and in the most wondrous of ways.

For a long moment, she stood gazing at him before she gave him a wistful smile and eased the covers over his shoulders. Fine, wide-set shoulders, powerful and braw, but not quite sturdy enough to carry the weight of the ghosts plaguing her.

Her very worst dragons.

And it was those beasts she had to flee, not him, for their presence in her bedchamber, even in the inky shadows of the corners, proved more than she could bear.

As quickly and quietly as she could, she dressed, eager to escape before the stinging heat at the backs of her eyes could turn to tears.

At the door, she cast one last glance toward her sleeping husband, then wished she hadn't, for the accursed shadows in the corners had shifted...their darkness stretching across the room to engulf the bulk of her bed.

Lifting her chin, she turned her back on them and raised the drawbar. "You will not besiege me," she whispered as she opened the door. "Nor will you make me cry."

Nor will you ruin his life, she added, the words silent, written in the blood of her heart.

Then she squared her shoulders and waited for Leo to join her. When he did, they slipped from the room. And all the way down the dimly lit passage, she struggled against her tears.

But she needn't have, for someone else shed them for her.

A darker, more solid shadow than her dragons.

And not nearly as ominous.

Only sad.

Standing vigil in the corner, her cowled robes drawn tight against a cold more chilling than any icy wind to ever lash at Dunlaidir's walls, the beautiful woman waited patiently until the other shadows faded.

Until their menace moved away from *him*.

And when at last they did, she gave a little sigh he would have credited to the wind, and, wiping the dampness from her cheeks, she, too, faded away.

S*he was gone.*

Sir Marmaduke knew it even before he came fully awake.

Blessed – or ill-wished, depending – with an uncanny knack for simply knowing things at times, this proved an occasion when his gut instinct sent his heart plummeting.

His blood pumping in his veins, not hot and thick as only hours before, but icy cold and thin with dread, he snaked the flat of his palm across the bed sheets, and knew true alarm at the cold that met his fingers.

Nary a hand-span of lingering warmth remained where she'd lain so sweetly beside him.

Of where they'd loved.

And she hadn't simply slipped away to tend certain early morning necessities. His perfect-for-him bride, *his heart*, had vanished in the small hours of the night.

All his doubts and regrets massed together and sat on his soul. A cold and heavy weight even one as hard-muscled as he couldn't shoulder away.

So he frowned.

Scowled up at the heavily carved ceiling of her bed and wondered if he'd dreamed the glories of the night they'd shared. Had she truly writhed beneath him, sighed her bliss, and called out his name?

Invited him to take her?

Aye, she had, for the scent of their loving, their spent passion, still clung to the bed sheets, even lacing the air within the confines of the curtained bed.

No mistake, they'd loved and with the greatest of passion.

And they'd done so in the darkest hour of the night, when all the world slept and shadows hid what one didn't want to see.

Like the ravaged face of a man who'd once, in a long-ago life, been amongst the most dashing of men.

Heaving a weary sigh, Marmaduke shoved back the bed covering and pushed to his feet, prepared, if not eager to face the cold-cast new day.

The saints knew, he'd had ample practice in rising above himself in trying times.

Thus steeled, he ignored the frantic thudding of a heart undone, and strode straight into the little ante-room to dress. And the moment he had, he dropped to his knees beside his leather satchel and rummaged for two things: his finely-wrought bronze mirror and Linnet MacKenzie's ragwort *beauty salve*.

The latter seemed to have gone missing so he upended his traveling pouch, letting its contents spill onto the piddle-stained pallet he'd called his own in the nights before his lady had welcomed his entry to her bed.

Then, at last, he spied the round earthen jar he sought – his *wonder* treatment. The last of his supply until his return to Kintail, for he'd used the salve with a heavy hand of late, all in the hopes of making himself more appealing.

Not handsome again, for, though a romantic, Marmaduke Strongbow was anything but a fool.

Nay, simply more palatable was all he'd hoped to achieve. Though now, this foul and black morn, even halfway acceptable would suffice.

Then, before he lost his courage, he pulled the handsome, loop-handled mirror from beneath a mound of recently washed braies, snatched up the jar of false hope and shattered dreams, and went long-strided to the window embrasure in his lady's bedchamber.

Still scowling, he dropped both items onto one of the windowseats, then yanked open the shutters. A cold, white world greeted him...chill and icy, its stinging bite as numbing as the ache settling round his heart.

He stared out at the pewter sea, at the white haze hovering low above the gray swells, and at the whirling curtains of snow stretching clear to the horizon. The brooding early morning sky, heavy with pale, dense clouds foretold more of the same.

Time of the essence now, he picked up the mirror and peered hard at his likeness. Thanks to his black frown and his singed hair, a more frightful beast than he'd ever glimpsed in the mirror's depths looked back at him.

A face so grim, so fierce, he could not blame his lady wife for slipping from his side.

His mind made up, he set down the mirror and retrieved the jar of *beauty treatment*. Closing his fingers around its familiar shape, he clung to his hopes and dreams for just a moment, then sent the little jar sailing through the opened window and into the sea.

Taking satisfaction at having freed himself of all illusions, he turned away from the windows.

It was time to find his wife.

LATER THAT MORNING, in Dunlaidir's great hall, Rhona plunked a large wooden bowl onto the scarred surface of the high table and, with a flourish, whipped away the bowl's cloth covering.

The Laird's Stone wept.

Astonishment washed over Catherine as she watched the impossible.

Rhona could scarce contain her excitement. "See you, my lady, I told you the stone cries."

"So you did." Her amazement too great for her to fuss at her friend about having lifted the stone from its strongbox, Catherine looked on in awe as crystal-clear beads of moisture appeared on the quartz-speckled Laird's Stone.

The glistening droplets leaked from the stone's heart to trickle down its rounded sides, swiftly filling the smooth wooden bowl.

The stone wept copiously, just as the legend claimed.

A sniffle beside her proved Rhona was on the verge of weeping, too. "James!" she cried, turning to him. "The Laird's Stone is recognizing you."

"Or we're about to see a death," someone in the crowded hall declared. "Last time the stone wept, the old Master passed on."

The jostling and low-voiced murmurs around the high table stilled at once. James, lacking in elation from the onset of the miracle, blanched.

"From what I have heard of the legend, the stone cannot herald the laird's passing until he has been duly accepted as Master of Dunlaidir," a deep voice said behind Catherine, and her heart tilted.

Sir Marmaduke drew up beside her, something raw-edged and indefinable simmering beneath his calm. "The tears we see are celebratory tears for the valor James has shown of late." He touched his hand to her shoulder, glanced down at her. "Is that not so?"

Catherine nodded, too unsettled by his proximity to speak.

Eoghann suffered no such difficulty. A broad smile spreading across his weather-lined face, he snatched an empty drinking mug off the table, filled it with frothy heather ale, then thrust the brimming cup into James' hand.

"Lighten your heart, my lord," the crusty seneschal said, raising his voice so all heard. "The stone is saluting you."

"Come, then, and let me commend you as well," Sir Marmaduke said to James. Stepping away from Catherine, he slid out his sword.

"Oh!" Rhona's hands flew to her cheeks. "He's going to knight you." Joy lit her pretty face and was quickly taken up by the onlookers thronging the dais. "Oh, my, oh, my."

Only Catherine forced her smile, for her skin prickled with an eerie

foreboding of the announcement her husband would next make. Claspings cold hands before her, she watched him place a hand on James' shoulder.

"Kneel, my friend," Sir Marmaduke's deep voice commanded. "Kneel, and accept the stroke of honor."

Hot color flooded James' face, but he dropped to his knees and bowed his head. A solemn quiet descended over the hall as Sir Marmaduke raised his silver-gleaming blade.

"Be valiant, James of Dunlaidir. Honor your fellow knights. Love God and keep your soul stainless at all times." The words spoken, Sir Marmaduke struck the flat of his steel first to one of James' shoulders, then other.

"I, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow of Balkenzie, dub thee knight," he finished the brief adubement. "Now rise, Sir James, and be ever proud."

"I shall, good sir, and I thank you," James gave the proper response, and stood.

Marmaduke sheathed his blade. "Be worthy and always stand tall," he advised, giving James a comradely thwack on the arm. "I know you shall."

"Hail Sir James!" a shout rose from the crowd. Similar cries and comment issued from others, respectful if not exuberant.

Leo seemed most pleased of all, dashing away from Catherine to streak circles about the hall, his excited barks leaving no doubt that he, at least, believed something extraordinary had happened.

"We must speak, my lady," Catherine's champion said the instant he returned to her side. The summons she's expected, cushioned by a gallant offering of his mailed arm.

Their gazes met and held for a long moment before she slipped her hand through his proffered arm. "You wish to inform me you are leaving?"

He nodded, as she'd known he would, and led her to a fairly quiet corner of the hall. "It is time. I wish to celebrate Yule at my own hearthside." He placed his hands on her shoulders as he so often did, but a new chill coated his words and his expression, though calm, held no warmth. "I do not care to winter her, my lady."

Catherine took a deep breath. "The winter is already upon us and will worsen by the day."

"More the reason to depart with all haste," he said, weighing his words. "The road home may be fraught with some hazard, but my men are used to harsh weather, as am I."

"I am sure." His wife glanced back to the dais end of the hall where James engaged Lachlan and a few of the younger Keith guards in animated conversation. He'd slung an arm around Rhona's waist,

clearly claiming her.

"They will be happy," Marmaduke said, watching them, taking some comfort in the young lord's newfound pride and grace. But a trace of concern marred his own lady's brow, and he smoothed it away with the side of his thumb.

"The older garrison men will flock to him, too," he assured her. "Especially after my men and I are gone."

"And Rhona will make him a fine and able wife." The thickness in her voice alarmed him, for he knew it had little to do with her companion and James.

"A fine and able consort is the wish of all men." He smoothed a tendril of hair back from her face. "A rare and precious bliss."

"Please, say no more." She paled, and the gravity of her tone squashed what hope still flickered inside him.

"You are my bliss," he said, damning his pride. "Will you deny the pleasure we shared this past night?"

"Nae, I will not." She lifted her chin. "It was beautiful beyond all my expectations."

His hope surging anew, Marmaduke cleared his throat. "Lady, are you man enough to stomach a bit of...roughness on the journey?"

Can you look past my ravaged face and love the man beneath?

Before she could answer, he wrapped his arms around her, drawing her close. He wanted to savor the feel of her soft warmth crushed against him for the twisting in his gut warned it might be the last time he'd hold her.

"I am not going on a journey," she said, and the finality of the words sank his heart. "But I am woman enough to tell you, you are better off leaving without me."

Pulling back, she pressed her fingers against his lips when he made to protest. "You deserve a woman who can love you with a full and open heart. I am not that woman."

Marmaduke released her, let his arms hang at his sides. "I will ask you once and never again," he said, stamping on his pride one final time. "Will you ride with me?"

"Nae, sir, I will not."

Five simply spoken words.

Utter honesty.

And then she was gone.

Vanished into the milling throng, leaving him alone in the smoke-hazed corner, the shattered remnants of his heart winking up at him from a glittering, mocking pile at his feet.

The next day, in the frozen quiet of near-dawn, Sir Marmaduke and his MacKenzie Highlanders rode through the arched pend of Dunlaidir's gatehouse, putting that once-more great stronghold behind them as they set off on the long journey home to Kintail.

A blustery wind, icy and black, accompanied them and nary a soul who dwelled within Dunlaidir's stout walls hadn't braved the frigid morn to pay their respects.

Scores of chilled, red-nosed well-wishers had waited for them in the bailey, some having stood vigil since before first light. And they tagged along now, on foot or mounted, keeping pace with Mamraduke and his men as their steeds clattered across the high and precipitous neck of land to the mainland.

His lady rode at his side as well, but only in a parting gesture of goodwill.

James, Rhona, Black Dugie, and others accompanied her, and even Leo trotted along. The little dog frolicked in the snow, weaving in and out of the legs of those trudging beside them, clearly unaware the slow procession was anything but a gay excursion.

Marmaduke knew and that was enough.

They'd all stay with him until he and his men reached the outskirts of the village. Then they'd return to Dunlaidir, and their lives.

As he would, too, and with all speed, for he burned to pass through the village, spur his steed, and return to Balknezie never to leave again, no matter how many pressing requests his liege's sweet lady wife plied him with.

No matter how many pointed stares Duncan MacKenzie aimed his way.

He'd steel himself against them all and remain where he belonged – a wounded beast sheltered deep in his lair, free to lick his wounds in peace.

Squaring his shoulders, he nodded to the villagers lining the road, his heart wrenching at the smiles they wore, the sincerity in their shouted well-wishes.

Peace and prosperity had returned to the region, and if the prattle-

mongers were to be believed, the proud new Master of Dunlaidir would soon take a wife.

A fine and good lass, loved by all. Able and big-hearted. And if some suspected her of being a mite meddlesome at times, no one really cared.

Aye, the good people of Dunlaidir and its lands had ample reason to rejoice.

Only their lady appeared solemn, her expression as grim-set as his own best field-of-battle stone face.

She rode quietly beside him, taking little heed of the crowd, even ignoring the sleet-laced wind tearing at them in great blasts and buffets.

Her guard only began to slip as they neared the end of the village road and the dark edge of the woods suddenly loomed ahead of them.

But it wasn't toward that boundary that she stared.

"Leo!" she cried then, yanking her horse around, then plowing straight through the crowd of tag-alongs to spur down a gorse and boulder-studded slope to a tiny loch some distance off the road.

Her little dog and another dashed about on the loch's thin crusting of ice. And even as she barreled near, calling his name, the ice cracked. The second dog leaped to safety, but Leo disappeared beneath the loch's smooth, gray surface.

"Holy Christ!" His own woes forgotten, Marmaduke kicked his horse in the sides and sent the beast hurtling across the frozen ground.

Reaching the lochside before his lady and those chasing after him, he leapt from his saddle, cast away his sword, and dived beneath the icy water.

Caterine reined in only seconds later...just as Leo scrambled to safety. Jumping down, she raced to the water's edge. "Oh, Leo!" she cried, relief coursing through her.

Wet, shivering, and not at all contrite-looking, the little dog shook himself, dousing her with a spray of freezing water. Grabbing him, she thrust him beneath the warm folds of her cloak, then glanced around for her champion.

And the moment she did, cold dread more punishing than the biting winter wind clamped down on her heart, for unlike Leo, Sir Marmaduke hadn't yet left the loch. Her braw champion was still beneath the water's ice-littered surface.

"Ach, dial!" Panic whirling through her, she pressed a fisted hand against her lips and stared at the place where he'd vanished into the water. Frozen with fear, she willed him to reappear.

But he didn't.

Only his words flew at her, borne on the icy wind.

...they only protect me from sword cuts and other sundry arms of

evil...

They never promised to keep me safe from flying embers and sparks.

Nor had they vowed to keep him safe from drowning.

Caterine shuddered, sheerest dread churning through her. Fear squeezed her chest in a vise-like grip as she stared in horror at the silent waters of the loch.

His men ran past her and plunged into the frigid depths - only to surface and re-surface without him, her heart sinking more each time they failed.

And through it all, she looked on as if from a great, disbelieving distance.

Young Lachlan clambered out first. Trembling with cold, and dripping wet, he raced at James. Grabbing his arm, he dragged her stepson to the loch's edge. "You have the best eyes," he cried. "We can see nothing. The water is too dark. You must look for him."

James blanched. His panicked gaze flashed to Caterine and then to the ice-crust ed loch, to the men thrashing about in the water.

"Go!" Lachlan shoved him forward, into the lapping shore-water.

"I am...I cannot..." James began, and then, to Caterine's amazement and relief, a look of steely determination settled over his face, and, whipping out his blade, he flung it aside, and plunged into the water.

Once, twice, over and over, he re-surfaced, spluttering with the cold, his own fear of water etched sharply onto his face, but each time he broke the surface, he drew a long breath and dived anew.

Then, just as the coldest anguish began to seize her, when she no longer cared if her shoulders shook and tears streamed, a great cheer rose from those gathered on the lochshore.

James had re-appeared, and this time, he'd found him. He held one arm slung around her champion's neck, but his head lolled at an odd angle and - as the crowd's ominous hush indicated - it appeared the saints had abandoned Sir Marmaduke Strongbow at last.

They'd turned their winged backs on him in his darkest hour, and left him to drown in a pitifully small, ice-glazed loch on the wrong side of Scotland.

“**L**ady, you must rest.”

Caterine ignored her friend’s admonishment – the hundredth such plea Rhona had made to her that morning alone – and continued to massage her champion’s fingers.

A desperate attempt to force her own warmth into his hands as they rested, cold and limp between hers.

A vain endeavor, but one she’d repeated with grim patience ever since his men had carried his unconscious form abovestairs and gently settled him in her bed.

“Lady, please,” Rhona beseeched her.

“Later,” Caterine said. “I shall rest when I am certain he will not... after I am sure he will...” She trailed off, another hot rush of tears scalding the backs of her eyes, another searing lump swelling her throat.

“For truth!” Rhona yanked back the bed hangings to peer at Sir Marmaduke’s still form. “He sleeps. He is not dead and everyone beneath this roof has assured you he is nowise near dying.”

Caterine pressed her lips together.

Rhona blew out a breath. “If James hadn’t been able to find him, and free his cloak from the underwater branch it’d caught on, he may well have died,” she owned, “but he did not and isn’t going to.”

“I shall stay here all the same.” Caterine placed her husband’s hands atop the covers and looked at Rhona, intending to send her away with some peppered comment, but the words froze on her tongue when she noted the dark shadows under her friend’s eyes.

Rhona’s face appeared as haunted as she knew hers must be.

“For one so confident he’ll live, you appear mightily distressed,” she said, hoping Rhona would deny it.

Not disappointing her, Rhona seized her hand and pulled her off the three-legged stool where she’s spent the last two days – and nights – tending her husband as he’d drifted in and out of a fitful rest.

A deep slumber the castle healer insisted he needed.

“It serves no purpose for you to exhaust yourself, bending over him like an angel of death,” Rhona chided, dragging her from the

chamber. "I vow he senses your fretting and cannot rest fully for worrying about you."

Holding her arm in an iron grip, Rhona herded her into the dimly lit passage outside her bedchamber. "Were you not so blinded by guilt or whate'er fool notions are plaguing you, you'd see by his steady breathing and fine color that he will be up and about before long."

Caterine wasn't so certain.

No one had directly told her, but from snippets of gossip floating about, and dire murmurings she suspected she wasn't meant to hear, she knew the Laird's Stone still cried.

And some castle folk believed its doing so meant her husband's death, and not James' acceptance as new lord.

But she let Rhona usher her along the corridor, and guide her down the winding turnpike stair to the hall. She was exhausted, and hadn't eaten in days.

Sensing her capitulation, Rhona flashed her a smile.

"It will do you good to spend some time below," she crooned. "Everyone is praising James for rescuing your husband." Pausing, she lowered her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. "My lady, I vow this means they have accepted him."

Caterine nodded, too weary to speak.

"After you've eaten, you can rest in my...in *James'* chamber, sleep away the whole day if you desire," Rhona rushed on.

Desire.

The word brought a fresh rush of tears to Caterine's eyes, but she blinked them away and walked with Rhona to the high table, the turmoil whirling inside her keeping her from paying too much heed to the absence of the Highlanders.

"All will be well," Rhona promised as she pulled back Caterine's chair. "You will see, my lady."

But all wasn't well.

And the overly loud hush that greeted her when, hours later, she finally returned to her bedchamber, only underscored how very *un*-well things were.

Her great four-poster loomed accusingly quiet, its mound of silk and furred coverings flung back to reveal...nothing.

Her champion was gone.



ABOUT THE SAME TIME, in the frost-gleaming uplands a good distance from Dunlaidir, Sir Marmaduke Strongbow drew rein so swiftly, his horse near reared up on his hind legs.

The beast did voice loud protest.

Marmaduke's men laughed. Great choking bouts of glee. The purest of know-it-all vaunting.

"Guidsakes, but that took you a while," Ross egged him, already turning his mount.

The others followed suit, all swiveling their heads toward him. And not a one looked shocked.

Or even surprised.

Truth tell, they all grinned.

Well warned, Marmaduke kned his horse before they could bedevil him anew. Digging in his spurs, he urged his mount into a thundering gallop and tore off in the direction whence they'd come, his horse's drumming hooves echoing the hammering rhythm of his heart.

"By all the gods!" Ross called out a short while later, pointing. "Looks like you charmed that one, but good."

Following Ross' outstretched arm, Marmaduke spotted her – a lone female rider, bent low over her horse's neck, and swiftly closing the distance between them.

"Fore God," he breathed, his heart near to bursting, scalding heat blurring the vision in his good eye.

Leaving his men to stare after him, he spurred ahead across the winter-stubbed ground, meeting her halfway. He swung down from his saddle before she'd even reined in. His men reached them just moments later, their wild shouts and hoots bringing a furious blush to his lady's face.

The little dog peeking at him from a leather pouch tied to the back of her saddle, made his heart pound even faster. Leo's presence had to be a good sign.

Striving for a semblance of dignity – lest indeed she'd only come to tender her farewell – Marmaduke ran a shaking hand over his singed, wind-blown hair and strode up to her.

"Lady," he addressed her, damning himself for a sentimental fool when a tear leaked from the corner of his good eye. "What brings you this way?" he managed, his throat almost too thick for him to speak. "Did you come to bid us a safe journey?"

Sliding down from her horse's back, she came toward him, the smile on her face *almost* banishing his demons. "And you, my lord," she countered, "are you not riding in the wrong direction?"

Something in her shining eyes, and the catch in her throat, allowed Marmaduke's hope to soar.

Even his men's bawdy jaunting ceased as, gathering near, the leering loons followed the exchange with unabashed nosiness. Wheeling around, Marmaduke swept them with his most wicked glare, but they only laughed.

To a man, they threw back their ugly heads and guffawed to the heavens.

And at the sound, the utter joy behind it – their undeniable belief that she'd chased after them for the one reason Marmaduke himself was too afraid to believe – something inside him cracked open and his demons, every last one of them, took flight.

With a great flutter of black wings and all the doubts that had ever plagued him, the whole host of them were caught up by a sudden, peculiarly strong gust of cold, wintry air and whisked away.

Be gone and harry him no more, the wind seemed to call after them. But then the chill gusts slackened and his men's chortles and hoots began to sound suspiciously wet and sloppy.

When Gowan blew his nose and dashed a meaty hand across his bearded face, Marmaduke knew he'd won the day...and his lady.

For his men were rough-hewn but no fools.

Drawing back his broad shoulders in best champion fashion, Marmaduke turned to his wife. "I was not riding in the wrong direction, I was returning for you," he admitted. "I told you I always do."

"And I was coming to join you on the journey," she gave back.

"It is a rough journey, my lady."

"A lady who loves never fears a spot or two of roughness, my lord."

Marmaduke blinked. "What are you saying, Catherine?"

She smiled. "Do you not know?"

"I would hear the words," he said, his heart swelling, already flooding with joy.

"As you wish." She glanced at his men, then apparently uncaring that they gawked, she gave a little cry and flung her arms around his neck, clung to him.

"I love you," she said, her words strong and loud enough for his ear-straining friends to catch every privy word. "I believe I have since the day you rode into Dunlaidir and kissed my hand so gallantly," she confessed, running her fingers through his less-than-perfect hair, pressing so sweetly against him, he feared he'd melt at her feet.

He'd consigned himself to never seeing her again, never again feeling her supple curves crushed against him.

The soft fullness of her breasts, and something very small and decidedly hard.

Hard, and jabbing ever deeper into his own chest, the closer she pressed herself into him.

Pulling back, he glanced down, the hot tears he'd tried so valiantly to hide, spilling free the instant he spied the small, hard object...

His ruby signet ring.

The heirloom hung about her neck on the fine, golden chain he'd mean to give her for it.

The ring she'd claimed she wouldn't wear until she was able to give him her heart.

His heart slammed against his ribs and his throat tightened. His men, for once, had the decency to turn away.

His lady, her own cheeks wet with tears, spoke her mind. "I found the chain in the ante-room, half-buried in the floor rushes," she explained, cradling his face as she did so, pushing up on her toes to kiss his scar.

Smiling through tears, she turned her blue gaze on him – the open gaze of a woman who never lied. "And, yes, my lord, I wear the ring because you hold my heart," she told him. "Fully, irrevocably, for all our days and beyond."

And Sir Marmaduke believed her.

But later, after they'd all re-mounted and resumed their homeward journey, traveling once more in the *right* direction, he cast a grateful glance heavenward and thanked the saints all the same.

Epilogue

Balkenzie Castle

Western Highlands at Yuletide

A fierce winter gale tore across Loch Duich, whipping its slate-gray surface and lashing at Balkenzie's stout walls with a ferocity seldom seen even in these wilder reaches of the Highlands.

But the night's fury couldn't dampen Sir Marmaduke's high spirits as he surveyed the castle's gaily festooned great hall. Many revelers had come to celebrate Yule.

And welcome him back to Kintail.

Home.

His own, and his sweet lady wife's.

At last.

And so the black night raging outside Balkenzie's snug walls did not bother him, nor steal a teensy bit of the joy from his heart.

And neither would the dark-frowning countenance of his best friend and liege, Duncan MacKenzie. Pointedly ignoring the festivities, the handsome Highland laird glowered at the Yule log rather than joining Marmaduke and the other carousers in spreading good cheer.

"How much longer do you think she will need?" He asked Marmaduke for the hundredth time.

"You ask me?" Lounging against the edge of a trestle table, Marmaduke shrugged. "However long the good Lord wills she must, I'd wager," he said, and lifted his cup of spiced wine in calm salute.

His cheek earned him another glare. "You can wipe that smirk off your face," Duncan grouched. "I have every right to be concerned."

"No one doubts that, my friend," Marmaduke conceded, sipping his hippocras. "Though I do sometimes wonder how the lady tolerates your bluster."

He slid a glance at the empty four-poster bed still crowding the middle of his hall. "I do commend you for allowing her to birth the child abovestairs rather than...*there*."

To Marmaduke's amazement, his old friend had the decency to look contrite.

But only for a moment.

"She disregarded all good sense and persisted in traipsing about despite her frail state," he argued. "I had no choice but to keep her where she could be watched over at all times."

"And her old nurse and my own good wife watch over her now, so you've no cause to stare holes of wrath into the Yule log."

Duncan's brows snapped together. "I am not staring at anything, you great lout, I'm straining my ears for the cry of a bairn."

He made a great sweeping gesture. "A near impossibility with all the buffoonery going on around us."

"It is Yule," Marmaduke reminded him, filling a mug with the warmed, spiced wine and handing it to Duncan. "Even one of your sour disposition should be able to tolerate a bit of revelry."

"I do not care how many lasses are ravished this night, how loud the trumpets are blasted, how much roasted meat is consumed, how often every blithering fool in your hall shouts '*Wassail!*' or '*All hail the old ones!*' Nor do I care if they all dance so hard they fall on their faces," Duncan declared, folding his arms when Marmaduke tried to offer him more hippocras.

"Tsk, tsch." Marmaduke shrugged and set down the wine cup. "And I thought your fair lady wife had mellowed your temper."

"And it is that fair lady who is on my mind, you dolt!" Running a hand through his dark hair, Duncan glanced again at the vaulted ceiling. "She is up there, mind you, and-"

A babe's cry, faint but undeniable, sounded from above, fine and lusty enough to be heard over the din, its portent instantly wiping the dark frown from Duncan's face.

A grin spreading across his own face, Marmaduke drew back his hand to give Duncan a hearty clap on the shoulder, but his friend was already sprinting across the hall toward the turnpike stair. Marmaduke ran after him, and, together, they took the winding steps three at a time.

The bairn's wails grew louder the closer they came to Marmaduke's and Catherine's bedchamber, and the door burst open as they neared. "You have a fine bairn, my lord." Catherine beamed upon seeing the MacKenzie laird. "A wee lassie with your dark hair and deep blue eyes."

"A lassie?" Duncan's eyes widened, his heart laid bare and smiling. "A wee lass?"

Catherine nodded, dashing away a tear. "And such a fine one. She is perfect...beautiful."

But Duncan had already pushed past her into the room.

“She looks just like him,” she said, smiling up at Marmaduke, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. “Raven-black hair, and lots of it, a sweet rosebud mouth, and the deepest blue eyes.”

Pausing, she swiped the back of her hand across her cheek. “Ne’er have I seen a more lovely babe.”

His good eye watering as fiercely, Sir Marmaduke slung an arm around her and led her into the bedchamber, purposely hanging back in the shadows to allow his liege a few private moments with his wife and their new child.

As private as one could be with old Elspeth, the midwife, bustling about, hovering over the bed like a mother hen.

Worse, every fool from below now gathered in the corridor, straining their necks to catch a glimpse of the MacKenzies’ new bairn...some cheeky souls even pressing into the birthing room.

“I told you, you had naught to fret about, laddie,” Fergus declared, his scrawny chest puffed with pride. The cheekiest of the lot, he marched right up to the bed.

Leaning forward, the aged seneschal examined the child for a long moment, then turned to the merrymakers crowding the door. “A bonnier lass ne’er graced these hills,” he pronounced, and, with even more cheek, smoothed his gnarled hand down the side of the mother’s face. “As we knew she’d be, eh, lass?”

“...as we knew...?” Duncan grumbled beneath his breath, but even he couldn’t sound very fierce with a thick voice and over-bright eyes.

Joining them at the bedside, Catherine smiled down at her sister as Elspeth smoothed a damp, scented cloth over Linnet’s brow.

Pale and shadow-eyed, Linnet MacKenzie lay back against the pillows, her new daughter cradled in her arms.

“She is beautiful.” Catherine touched a finger to the babe’s teensy, pink hand, her heart swelling.

“And *you* are beautiful, my sister. I am so pleased to have you back.” Linnet reached for her hand. “You are not angry at me for... for...”

“For sending my champion?” Catherine glanced at him, her free hand straying to the large ruby ring hanging about her neck. “Nae, my dear, I only wish you had sent him sooner.”

Linnet nodded, clearly pleased. “And neither because I-”

“Because you kept a sweet secret from me?” Catherine reached out to stroke the black down crowning the babe’s head. “Nae, that, too, I understand,” she said, sending another look at her love, her heart squeezing when he wrapped an arm around her, drew her close.

“And you were right. Had I known, I would have come at once, and a certain champion would ne’er have known if I’d truly given him my heart.”

“And have you?” Linnet asked. “Do you love him as-” breaking off, she shot a quick glance at her own husband, “as we’d hoped you would?”

“Nae.” Catherine shook her head. “I love him more. Much more,” she assured her sister, and anyone else who cared to hear.

An audible sigh, or perhaps just the restless night wind, came from somewhere close by, but when Catherine glanced around she didn’t see anyone standing near enough to have made the sound.

Rubbing at the odd tingling along her nape, she gave her sister a tremulous smile. “You’ve created a fine and beautiful new life.”

“*You* have a fine, new life, too,” Linnet said, her voice thick with emotion.

“Aye, I do,” Catherine agreed, reaching for her husband’s hand. “A new and good life.”

“And what shall we call *this* life?” Duncan wanted to know, his dark blue eyes gleaming a tad too bright. He touched his wife’s cheek. “Have you thought of a name for our fair daughter?”

“What do you think of calling her Arabella?” Catherine suggested, the name popping into her mind just then, but somehow seeming so very right.

Her husband glanced sharply at her, but when she squeezed his hand and smiled, the look he gave her warmed her clear to her toes.

“Well?” Catherine looked again at her sister, at the wee girl-child.

“Aye, Arabella is a fine name,” Linnet agreed, glancing at her husband. “And you, my lord?”

Duncan peered hard at Sir Marmaduke, then, apparently satisfied by what he saw, a bold smile spread across his handsome face. “Arabella, it shall be.”

And the moment the words were spoken, somewhere in the dark of the cold, winter night, a raven-haired angel smiled.

Did you know?

Reviews are worth gold to authors – these days more than ever. When readers share their thoughts on a book, other readers listen. There's no better way to spread word about stories you love. A win-win for readers and the authors you love.

If you enjoyed *Bride of the Beast*, I would be really appreciative if you would review the book online – Amazon, BookBub, and Goodreads are the best options. A review needn't be long. Something as simple as 'I really loved this story' is great!

My heartfelt thanks!

Author's Note

Author's Note

Dear Readers,

It's always daunting to re-release an older book. *Bride of the Beast* was originally published in 2003 by Warner Books, now known as Hachette Book Group/Grand Central Publishing. Sir Marmaduke's story was my third release and, as noted in this book's acknowledgement, the story came to be because so many readers fell in love with him in *Devil in a Kilt*. Readers wrote to me and to my publisher asking for him to have a happy-ever-after of his own.

And so *Bride of the Beast* was born. Sir M as the hero came to be known by readers, did well, releasing as a *Romantic Times* TOP PICK with a wonderful 4 ½ star review, and winning one of the magazine's K.I.S.S Hero Awards. *Bride of the Beast* also made the Waldenbooks bestseller list, a big deal back in the day. There are many foreign language editions and I am always pleased (*and so happy for dear Sir M*) when I hear from readers in distance lands who lose their hearts to this scarred but great-hearted hero.

Readers who have kept up with my Clan MacKenzie stories (*and a few others*) know that he makes an appearance in quite a few of my stories. I imagine that will always be so, loving him as I do.

All that said, my writing voice has changed over time and so I made some tweaks as I readied this book for re-release. Mainly, I rephrased some wording, added new dialogue, divvied up super-long chapters (*a thing back in the day*), and toned down some of the heat. The story released as one of my hottest ever, the steam factor blistering in the original edition. Now it's what I'd call 'steamier than usual' for my books.

The story, however, remains the same.

If you loved Sir M way back when, I hope you fall in love with again in this new edition. If you're a new-to-me reader, I hope you enjoyed meeting this hero and his friends.

Below are a few behind-the-ink tidbits about the story. I hope you'll find them interesting...

~ Sir Marmaduke: I'm well aware (*and always was*) that the name

Marmaduke isn't a typical romance novel hero name. However, the name is incredibly heroic in true-life historical context and it is from the days of Scotland's hero king, Robert the Bruce, that I was inspired to name Sir M as I did...

A true historical figure, Sir Marmaduke Tweng, was a champion English knight in the years of the Scottish War of Independence. He'd fought against William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, and at significant battles from Stirling Bridge to Bannockburn. He was also known to be a man of honor. Unseated at Bannockburn, he sought the Bruce, refusing to surrender his sword to any other. In respect of Sir Marmaduke's chivalry, Robert Bruce invited him to his royal tent, supping him at his own table.

The real Sir Marmaduke was then released without ransom and allowed to return in peace to England. It is believed the two men, Tweng and the Bruce, remained in touch throughout their lifetimes, both honoring the other's valor.

When I was writing *Devil in a Kilt* and wanted that book's hero, Duncan MacKenzie, to have a gallant English knight as his best friend, I remembered Robert the Bruce and Sir Marmaduke. No other name for this character would do, and I hope both men would smile if they knew.

~ Sassunach: There are several spellings for this Scottish word for the English. Sassenach is probably the most popular. The Irish use Sasanach. I prefer Sassunach with 'u' because it is the spelling I've come across most often in my nonfiction research books on medieval Scotland. After decades of 'feeling at home' with this spelling, it would feel odd to me to use another version.

~ Nae/Nay: The two spellings for this word is a nod to Sir Marmaduke being English. The words have the same meaning, obviously. But Scots use nae, with nay being the English version. Scottish friends corrected me on this many years ago, upon reading my early books and so I switched to nae for Scottish characters and nay for English ones.

~ Devorgilla: Longtime readers may have blinked to spot Devorgilla in this book. They will know she was not in the original edition. The old gal made her first appearance in my second release, *Knight in Her Bed*. As she went on to become a recurring character in most of my books and is a reader favorite, I allowed her a cameo glimpse or two in this new version of *Bride of the Beast*. The idea was hers, and who am I to refuse her? Doing so could have seen me waking up as a newt or naked in a patch of stinging nettles. To those who know her, I hope

you enjoyed meeting up with her in Sir M's story. *(even if only in passing)* New readers: Devorgilla is a meddlesome crone who stirs magic and mayhem in my stories.

~ Dunlaidir Castle: Lady Caterine's home was loosely based on the magnificent clifftop ruins of Dunnottar Castle near Stonehaven on Scotland's east coast. Few strongholds can offer such an awe-inspiring setting *(Dunlaidir is as close in description to the real site as my pen could write it)*, and I am always amazed that it is often overlooked by tourists.

Dunnottar's history has threads through much of Scotland's most monumental and turbulent past – as just a few examples, thousands of English soldiers hid in the castle, hoping to escape William Wallace. Hero that he was, Wallace climbed the cliff, nipped in through a window, and then opened the gates so his men could rush inside. Not a single Englishman survived. England's Edward III also set his sights on Dunnottar, but the Scots had other ideas and quickly reclaimed it.

The site was considered so secure that the Regalia of Scotland was kept there during the Commonwealth. Later, when the castle was forced to surrender, the treasures were secreted out by women who hid the jewels among their packed clothes and even in a sack of flax. There's so much more, a wealth of fascinating history. And, yes, the Keith family held Dunnottar for time, hence using the name in this book.

I fell in love with Dunnottar as a young girl when I saw its picture in a Scottish magazine. Later, when I was able to visit the ruin, I became even more enchanted. If ever you have the chance, do make a stop there. I promise you'll love Dunnottar, too.

~ The Laird's Stone: I love weaving Highland magic into my stories. To me, there's so much magic and wonder in Scotland that it would be impossible *(or sad)* to leave out all the legend and lore. It's everywhere, and to ignore would be to turn your back on some of Scotland's most colorful and fascinating history.

In *Bride of the Beast*, the Laird's Stone was based on Fyvie Castle's Weeping Stone. The legend of Fyvie's stones-that-weep is credited to Sir Thomas de Ercildoun aka Thomas the Rhymer, a 13th century seer. On a visit to Fyvie Castle he warned of doom unless three stones used in building the castle were returned to their original locations in the castle grounds.

Of course, no one could identify the stones. One is believed to be in the castle's charter Room, and in the tower's foundation, and a third at the bottom of a nearby river. Supposedly, the stones (wherever they are) weep whenever trouble threatens the Laird of

Fyvie. To this day, though, a single stone in the tower remains dry when the surrounding stones are wet, and when the others are dry, it is wet. This was confirmed to me by a friend who worked for many years for Scotland's National Trust, so who knows?

~ The Mackintoshes of Nought/Glen of Many Legends: This clan is mentioned during a conversation between Catherine and Rhona. Readers who would enjoy meeting the Mackintoshes can do so in *Temptation of a Highland Scoundrel*, in my *Highland Warriors* series. If you've missed this series and enjoy my writing, I think you'll love these stories. Kendrew Mackintosh, hero of *Temptation of a Highland Scoundrel*, holds the honor of being my all-time favorite (medieval Scottish) hero. Here's a link to his book: mybook.to/HighlandScoundrel

~ Leo: Catherine's little dog was based on my beloved, sadly-late Jack Russell terrier, Em. He napped on my lap during the entire writing of this book's original edition and I like to think he lives on in the book's pages, as Catherine's Leo, who he inspired. Em has been gone almost seven years as I type this and I still miss him so much. If you're an animal lover and have a dog and cat, please give them a hug and some kisses from me. Our darlings are with us for such a short time, but they remain in our hearts for eternity.

That's it for this book. Thank you again for reading *Bride of the Beast*. And for taking the time to read my thoughts, here in this Author's Note.

Wishing you Highland Magic!
Sue-Ellen Welfonder
(aka Allie Mackay)

Sneak Peek

Did you miss meeting Sir Marmaduke in *Devil in a Kilt*, the book that launches my Clan MacKenzie series? Enjoy a glimpse at this special story...

Devil in a Kilt *Clan MacKenzie Series*

Romantic Times Reviewers Choice Award Winner
Best First Historical Romance of the Year
RT Book Reviews TOP PICK, 4 ½ Stars, and K.I.S.S Hero Award

A fiery angel, a coldhearted devil, and a marriage hotter than hell!

Linnet MacDonnell is the youngest of seven sisters, and not the family beauty. With her flame-bright red hair and gift of second sight, no man wants her. But the devil will take her. Bartered as a bride to her father's sworn enemy, the powerful Highland chieftain Duncan MacKenzie of Kintail, she has no choice but to enter a marriage with a man rumored to have murdered his first wife and said to possess neither heart nor soul.

Forbidding and proud, Duncan MacKenzie, the Black Stag of Kintail, wants one thing from his new bride – to use her special gift to determine if young Robbie is truly his son. He never expects the MacDonnell lass to stubbornly follow her heart, chase away the darkness in his castle with light and laughter, and ignite a raging fire in his blood. How *dare* she defy him, and tempt a devil like him to feel what he fears most of all – love!

A Romantic Times Award-winning story as tempestuous, colorful, and passionate as medieval Scotland itself... *Devil in a Kilt!*

Devil in a Kilt

Devil in a Kilt *Clan MacKenzie Series*

Chapter One

*Dundonnell Keep, Western Highlands
Scotland 1325*

“**T**is said he’s merciless, the devil’s own spawn.” Elspeth Beaton, unspoken seneschal of the MacDonnell keep, folded her arms over her substantial girth and glowered at her laird, Magnus MacDonnell. “You cannae send the lass to a man known to have murdered his first wife in cold blood!”

“Is that so?” Magnus took another swig of ale, seemingly unaware that most of the frothy brew dribbled into his unkempt beard. He slammed his pewter mug onto the high table and glared back at his self-appointed chamberlain.

“I dinnae care if Duncan MacKenize is the devil himself or if the bastard’s killed ten wives. He’s offered for Linnet, and ‘tis an offer I cannae refuse.”

“You cannae give your daughter to a man said to possess neither heart or soul.” Elspeth’s voice rose with each word. “I willnae allow it.”

Magnus guffawed. “You willnae allow it? You overstep yourself, woman! Watch your mouth, or I’ll send you along with her.”

High above the great hall, safely ensconced in the laird’s lug, a tiny spy chamber hidden within Dundonnell’s thick walls, Linnet MacDonnell peered down at her father and her beloved servant as they argued over her fate.

A future already decided and sealed.

Not until this moment had she believed her sire would truly send her away, especially not to a MacKenzie. Though none of her six older

sisters had married particularly well, at least her da hadn't plighted a single one of them to the enemy. Straining her ears, she waited to hear more.

"Word is the MacKenzie is a man of strong passions," Elspeth pronounced. "Linnet knows little of a man's baser needs. Her sisters learned much from their mother, but Linnet is different. She's e'er run with her brothers, learning their-"

"Aye, she's different!" Magnus raged. "Naught has plagued me more since the day my poor Innes died birthing her."

"The lass has many skills," Elspeth countered. "Perhaps she lacks the grace and high looks of her sisters and late mother, may the saints bless her soul, but she would still make a man a good wife. Surely you can arrange a more agreeable marriage for her? One that isn't sure to bring her unhappiness?"

"Her happiness matters naught to me. The alliance with MacKenzie is sealed!" Magnus thundered. "Even if I wished her better, what man needs a wife who can best him at throwing blades? And dinnae pester me about her other fool habits."

Magnus took a long swig of ale, then wiped his mouth on his sleeve. "A man wants a woman interested in tending his aching tarse, not a patch of damty herbs!"

A shocked gasp escaped Elspeth's lips and she drew herself to her full but unimpressive height. "If you do this, you needn't tax yourself by banishing me from the dubious comforts of this hall. 'Tis gladly I shall go. Linnet will not be sent to the lair of the Black Stag alone. She'll need someone to look out for her."

Linnet's heart skittered, and gooseflesh rose on her arms upon hearing her soon-to-be husband referred to as the Black Stag. No such creature existed. While animals of certain prowess often adorned coats of arms and banners, and some clan chieftains called themselves after a lion or other such noble beast, this title sounded ominous.

An omen of ill portent.

But one she had little time to consider. Rubbing the chillbumps from her arms, Linnet pushed aside her rising unease and concentrated on the confrontation below.

"'Tis glad I'll be to see your back," her father was ranting. "Your nagging willnae be missed."

"Will you not reconsider, my lord?" Elspeth changed her tactic. "If you send Linnet away, who will tend the garden or do the healing? And dinnae forget how often her gift has aided the clan."

"A pox on the garden and plague take her heathen gift!" Magnus bellowed. "My sons are strong and healthy. We dinnae need the lass and her herbs. Let her aid the MacKenzie. 'Tis a fair exchange since he only wants her for her sight. Think you he offered for he because she's

so bonnie? Or because the bards have sung to him of her womanly allures?"

The MacDonnell laird's laughter filled the hall. Loud and mean-spirited, it bounced off the walls of the laird's lug, taunting Linnet with the cruelty behind his words.

She cringed.

Everyone in the keep would hear his slurs.

"Nae, he doesnae seek a comely wife," Magnus roared, sounding as if he were about to burst into another gale of laughter. "The mighty MacKenzie of Kintail isn't interested in her looks or if she can please him or nae when he beds her. He wants to know if his son is his own or his half-brother's bastard, and he's willing to pay dearly to find out."

Elspeth gasped. "You know the lass cannae command her gift at will. What will happen to her if she fails to see the answer?"

"Think you I care?" Linnet's father jumped to his feet and slammed his meaty fists on the table. "I am glad to be rid of her! All I care about are the two MacDonnell kinsmen and the cattle he's giving in exchange for her. He's held our clansmen for nigh onto six months. Their only sin was a single raid!"

Magnus MacDonnell's chest heaved in indignation. "'Tis a dullwit you are if you do not realize their sword arms and strong backs are more use to me than the lass. And MacKenzie cattle are the best in the Highlands." He paused to jeer at Elspeth. "Why do you think we're e'er lifting them?"

"You'll live to rue this day."

"Rue the day? Bah!" Magnus leaned across the table, thrusting his bearded face forward. "I'm hoping the boy is his half-brother's brat. Think how pleased he'll be if he gets a son off Linnet. Mayhap grateful enough to reward his dear father-in-law with a bit o' land."

"The saints will punish you, Magnus. The old gods, too."

"I fear none of them!" Linnet's father laughed. "I dinnae care if a whole host of saints come after me. The pagan ancients, likewise. This marriage will make me a rich man. I'll hire an army to send the sniveling lot back where they came from!"

"Perhaps the arrangement will be good for Linnet." Elspeth squared her shoulders, her voice surprisingly calm. "I doubt the MacKenzie partakes of enough ale each time he sits at his table to send him sprawling face-first into the floor rushes. Not if he's the fine warrior the storytellers claim."

"Fine warrior?" Magnus straightened. "Did you no' just call him a murderer?"

"There are many tales about him." Elspeth fixed the laird with a cold stare. "Have you ne'er listened when the bards sing of his great

valor serving our good King Robert Bruce at Bannockburn? 'Tis said the Bruce himself calls the man his champion."

"Out! Be gone from my hall!" Magnus MacDonnell's face turned as red as his beard. "Linnet leaves for Kintail as soon as Ranald has the horses saddled. If you want to see the morn, gather your belongings and ride with her!"

Perring through the spy hole, Linnet watched her beloved Elspeth give Magnus one last glare before she stalked from the hall. The instant her old nurse disappeared from view, Linnet leaned her back against the wall and drew a deep breath.

Everything she'd just heard circled through her mind. Her da's slurs and disdain, Elspeth's attempts to defend her, and then her unexpected praise for Duncan MacKenzie. Heroic acts in battle or nae, he remained the enemy.

But what disturbed her the most was her own odd reaction when Elspeth called the MacKenzie a man of strong passions. Even now, heat rose to her cheeks at the thought. She was embarrassed to admit it, even to herself, but she yearned to learn about passion.

She suspected the tingles that sped through her at the notion of wedding a man of heated blood had something to do with such things. Most likely so did the way her heart had begun to thump upon hearing Elspeth's words.

Her face grew warmer, as did the rest of her, but she fought to ignore the disquieting sensations. She didn't want a MacKenzie to bestir her in such a manner. Imagining how her da would laugh if her knew she harbored dreams of a man desiring her chased away the last bits of her troublesome musings.

Resignation tinged by anger settled over her. If only she'd been born as fair as her sisters. Lifting her hand, she ran her fingertips over the curve of her cheek. At least her skin was smooth and unblemished. But while her sisters had been graced with creamy and clear complexions, a smattering of freckles marred hers.

And unlike her sisters' hair, always smooth and in place, she'd been burdened with a wild mane she couldn't keep plaited. She did like its color. Of a bolder tone than her sisters' blondish red, hers was a deep shade of copper, almost bronze. Her favorite brother, Jamie, claimed her hair could bewitch a blind man.

A tiny smile tugged at her lips.

Aye, she liked her hair.

And she loved Jamie. She loved each of her eight brothers, and now she could hear them moving through the hall below. Even as her father's drunken snores drifted up to her, so did the sounds of her brothers making ready for a swift departure.

Her farewell to Dundonnell Castle. The dark and dank hall of a

lesser and near-landless clan chief, her ale-loving da, but the only home she had ever known.

Now she must leave for an uncertain destiny, her place here wrested from her by her father's greed. Tears stung her eyes, but she blinked them away, not wanting him to see them should he stir himself and deign to look at her as she exited his hall.

Steeling herself, she snatched up her leather herb pouch, her only valued possession, and slipped from the laird's lug. She hurried down the tower stairs as quickly as she dared, then dashed through the great hall without so much as a glance at her slumbering da.

For the space of a heartbeat, she'd almost hesitated, almost giving in to a ridiculous notion she should awaken him and bid him farewell. But the urge vanished as quickly as it'd come.

Why should she bother?

He'd only grouse at her for disrupting his sleep. And was he not pleased to be rid of her? Worse, he'd sold her to the laird of the MacKenzies, the MacDonnells' sworn enemies since long before her birth.

And the man, king's favorite and strong-passioned or nae, only wanted her for the use of her gift and because he'd been assured she wasn't bonnie. Neither prospect was flattering nor promised an enduring marriage.

That being so...

She took one last deep gulp of Dundonnell's smoke-hazed air as she stood before the massive oaken door leading to the bailey. Perhaps in her new home she wouldn't be suffered to fill her lungs with stale, ale-soured air.

"Oh, bury St. Columba's holy knuckles," she muttered, borrowing Jamie's preferred curse as she dashed a tear from her cheek.

Before more could fall, she pulled open the iron-shod door and stepped outside. Though late morning, a chill, blue-gray mist still hung over Dundonnell's small courtyard – just as a pall hung over her heart.

Her brothers, all eight of them, stood with the waiting horses, each brother looking as miserable as she felt. Elspeth, though, appeared oddly calm and already sat astride her pony. Other clansmen and their families, along with her da's few servants, crowded together near the opened castle gates. Like her brothers, they all wore sullen expressions and remained silent, but the telltale glisten in their eyes spoke a thousand words.

Linnet kept her chin high as she strode toward them, but beneath the folds of her woolen cloak, her knees shook. At her approach, Cook stepped forward, a clump of dark cloth clutched in his work-reddened hands.

“‘Tis from us all,” he said, his voice gruff as he thrust the mass of old-smelling wool into Linnet’s hands. “It’s been locked away in a chest in your da’s chamber all these years, but he’ll never know we took it.”

“What have you done?” With trembling fingers, Linnet unfolded the *arisaid* and let Cook adjust its soft length over her shoulders.

“Only what you deserve, lass.” He belted the plaid around her waist, the moment solemn. “My wife made this for Lady Innes, your mother. She wore it well, and it is our wish that you will, too. ‘Tis a bonnie piece, if a wee bit worn.”

“It’s perfect.” Emotion formed a hot, choking lump in Linnet’s throat as she smoothed her hands over the *arisaid*’s pliant folds. A few moth holes and frayed edges didn’t detract from the plaid’s worth. To her, it was beautiful – a treasure she’d cherish always.

Her eyes brimming with tears, she threw herself into Cook’s strong arms and hugged him tight. “Thank you,” she cried against the scratchy wool of his own plaid. “Thank you all! Mercy, but I shall miss you.”

“Then dinnae say good-bye,” he said, setting her from him. “We shall see you again, never worry.”

As one, her kinsmen and friends surged forward, each one giving her a fierce hug. No one spoke and she was grateful, for had they, she would’ve lost what meager control she had over herself. Then one voice, the smithy’s, rang out just as her eldest brother Ranald lifted her into a waiting saddle. “Ho, lass,” Ian called, pushing his way through the throng.

When he reached them, the smithy pulled his own finely honed dirk from its sheath and handed it to Linnet. “Better protection than that teensy wench’s blade you wear,” he said, nodding in satisfaction as she withdrew her own blade and exchanged it for his.

Ian’s eyes, too, shone with unusual brightness. “May you ne’er have cause to use it,” he said, stepping away from her pony.

“May the MacKenzie say his prayers if she does,” Ranald vowed, then tossed Linnet her reins. “We’re off,” he shouted to the rest of them, then swung up into his own saddle.

Before Linnet could catch her breath or even thank the smithy, Ranald gave her pony a slap on its rump and the shaggy beast bolted through the opened gates, putting Dundonnell Castle forever behind her.

Linnet choked back a sob, not letting it escape, and stared straight ahead. She refused – *she couldn’t* – look back.

Under other circumstances, she’d be glad to go. Grateful even. But she had the feeling that she was merely exchanging one hell for another. And, heaven help her, she didn’t know which she preferred.

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About the Author

“Sue-Ellen Welfonder brings legends and love to life.” – Fresh Fiction

USA Today bestselling author Sue-Ellen Welfonder won Romantic Times Best Historical Romance Award for her debut title, *Devil in a Kilt*. Many of her books have been RT Award nominees and have received RT Top Picks and K.I.S.S. Hero Awards. She is thrilled to be a winner of InD'Tale's RONE Award. Her favorite reader compliment is that her stories transport them to medieval Scotland, the setting of most of her books. She is also known for her strong heroines, Alpha heroes, and weaving Highland magic and humor into her tales.

Sue-Ellen also writes as Allie Mackay, penning contemporary paranormals, mostly set in the Scottish Highlands.

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